

GOG AND MAGOG

GOG  
AND  
MAGOG

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1.

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Marcus Steinbecker pushed aside the sheaf of documents and rubbed his eyes. He turned his chair to look out of the window. His office was on the top floor of one of the great towers which flanked the ocean. Father Joel had disliked them, he had called them Salem's modern day equivalent of the Tower of Babel. Perhaps, he hadn't been so far wrong.

It had become dark early and promised to be a wild night. An icily cold blizzard had swept down from the polar regions. He shivered although it was warm within the climate control of the office. He wondered how much longer he could rely on the luxury of that particular form of comfort and then he reflected once again, on how drastic had been the change since he had last visited Jerusalem. It seemed an eternity since he had sat down at Asher's table and that had been eleven days before the end of the thousandth year of the Kingdom of Peace. It was only three years - three short years since that meeting. So much had been crowded into that time.

He still remembered the tension which had greeted the first day of the new era. The apprehensive looks, the watchful glances, the wariness for the first signs of Satan's influence. Outwardly, nothing changed. The sun still shone with the undiminished strength of the time of the Kingdom. The full moon still bathed the countryside with a radiance which made it like the sun of former times. The harvest in each month of the year produced its yield - and the words of the Apostle Peter, written three thousand years earlier, were fulfilled:

'Our fathers have been laid to their rest, but still everything continues exactly as it has been since the world began.'

The Kingdom had ended, but everything continued exactly as it had been during those benevolent days - or so it was at first.

Satan had had a thousand years in which to hone his skills. He was in no hurry to announce his release from captivity. His approach was much more subtle and the changes, when they came, were almost unnoticeable. There was no abrupt transition, no sudden clarion call or throwing down of the gauntlet, nor was there a widespread, common trend. It was the twelve Administrators, whose stewardship covered the entire area of the earth's surface, who were in a position to see the small beginnings of what was to take place. A small pebble can start an avalanche and in the end, a mountainside of rock can hurtle into the valley.

The mellow conditions of the Kingdom began to deteriorate by degrees. In one place, the yield of a particular crop would fall below expectations for no apparent reason. In another, from one month to the next, fertile ground refused to germinate seed. There was a multiplier effect and in following months the problems would be magnified and adjoining crop areas would become affected. It was like the spread of a disease.

Soon, there was evidence that the weather cycles were changing. Meteorologists reported that it was linked to unsettled conditions on the sun. Unsuspected solar storms created havoc with the earth's magnetic field, which in turn disturbed weather patterns and balances which had existed for

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a thousand years. As the months passed, increasing areas of the earth's surface reported the failure of their harvests. Gradually, it became abnormal for there to be twelve harvests in the year and eventually, the most the earth would yield was three - and even three harvests was confined to especially favoured localities.

The change in the physical conditions was accompanied by something far more sinister. The wary and suspicious glances of the first hours after Satan's release, developed into harsh verbal exchanges, in turn, this soon developed into animosity, strife and conflict. Marcus still remembered the report of the first murder in his locality. The cause had been quite trivial and in earlier times, the matter would have been settled in a few moments of amicable discussion. The situation had become inflamed out of all proportion to the problem. There had been a fight - a physical battle - and then one of the participants had taken a rock and crushed the head of his opponent. It had been over in a matter of seconds, leaving the assailant bewildered and stunned by what he had done.

Marcus had been relieved from the responsibility of having to deal with the matter. The family of the victim had exacted their own form of justice and had justified their actions by quoting the ancient law of the Old Testament.

'Wherever hurt is done, you shall give life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot, burn for burn, bruise for bruise, wound for wound'

He had been able to do nothing and there had been no intervention from the Kings and Priests who had ruled the Kingdom for a thousand years. It was only a matter of time before recognition of the authority of the Administrators became nominal - nothing more than lip service from distant centres which were under the control of clan families. The clan families eyed each other with suspicion and conducted their own private vendettas.

It was all too obvious that the Kingdom of Peace was at an end and that they were now confronted with the Time of Judgement. It was a natural progression. Soon would come the ultimate Judgement, when all men would be called upon to answer for every thought, word and deed.

Marcus turned his thoughts back to the present. They had reached another crisis point and it was this fresh crisis, on top of so many others, which kept him in his office long into the evening. Marcus eased back in his chair and stared at the falling snowflakes. He was reluctant to go home. Leah wasn't there and in his heart, he didn't think she would ever return. Their children were at the huge house in the hills above the city. They were being well looked after - that is, as well looked after as children could be without their mother. He allowed the bitterness to build. Circumstances could have been so different, he remembered the confident plans he had had during the last years of the Kingdom.

They had been complacent years. Years when the power of the released Satan had been seriously underestimated. Years when everything still seemed possible and no difficulty too great that it could not be overcome. It was a hard fact that things were not as they could have been or as he had imagined they would be. He had always envisaged Leah and himself seeing out the time which remained and facing the difficulties together, secure in their mutual love and trust. It was the most painful illusion to have been

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shattered when the restraints on the evils of Satan, had been removed.

The sheaf of documents on the desk demanded urgent attention, he chose to ignore them - of late, everything seemed to require his urgent attention. No one else in his Administration seemed prepared to make the hard decisions - it was all left to him. He was realist enough, pessimistic enough, to know that it was only a matter of time before whatever decisions he made, would be ineffectual. More and more, he found himself between a rock and a hard place.

It was snowing more heavily and driving against the outer wall of the building. It was surely his imagination, but he sensed the structure shuddering under the impact. When the first snowstorms had come, they had been a novelty. Few of Salem's population had ever been to the polar regions, or the high barrier mountains, during the halcyon days of the Kingdom. When the first snow had come to Salem, it had been something to inspire wonder and a certain childish delight. Those happier emotions soon turned to consternation when it was realised that the bountiful, multiple harvests, had become a thing of the past. He thanked God that they had been led to lay up stores for the lean years.

He felt stiff and old these days, and he was quite certain that it wasn't his imagination. Most of those who had reached their high centuries, were showing signs of degeneration. It was worse for those who were beyond their eight hundredth year. Delicate enquiries had revealed that Alexei Kharkov, his counterpart in the Asia Heartland, was bedridden. Marcus had no doubt, that Alexei's 'governors' made all the decisions without the benefit of centralised guidance.

As for Asher ben Jacobi, his condition was the excuse for Leah's absence. Joel's friend had suffered a stroke and Leah had insisted that her place was to hurry to his side. It had provided the impulse for another disagreement between Marcus and herself. These days, it didn't take much for them to join in battle. He made it clear that he wasn't happy that she was deserting him, no matter how worthy the cause. He didn't like the idea of the mother of his children taking a suborbiter to the other side of the world and removing herself from him and their mutual comfort. He wasn't impressed that she should put herself at such a distance in view of the developments which were building to the north.

He moved restlessly back to his desk. Although three years had passed, they still hadn't identified Gog with any certainty. Marcus was darkly suspicious of Georgi Malenski but there had been no hint that Alexei Kharkov's northern 'governor' was planning anything sinister. It was also beyond dispute that those who had settled on the northern plain bordering the Arctic Ocean, were on the move, but that also included those who were citizens of his own Administrative area. Their movement wasn't a matter of menace, it was simply one of climatic necessity.

The previously fecund lands which had produced such bumper crops during the time of the Kingdom, were now incapable of supporting life. The bitterly cold weather fronts which swept down from the northern pole, had layered the land with a thick crust of ice and snow. The problem of supporting, feeding and resettling this great movement of people, took a great deal of his time.

Marcus took comfort in the fact that Ambrose Saurian was keeping a close eye on the situation, He had reported that the population which had

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settled around the delta of the Lena, had started to evacuate to the south west, into the Heartland. They were avoiding the high mountains to the east of the river, which meant that they were not crossing over into the area of Marcus's responsibility. There were a large number of them, but they were not behaving militantly and they still had enough to eat. Marcus couldn't help wondering how long the food surpluses would last. Regardless of the apparent peaceful nature of the exodus, it would bear watching. He had already resolved to insist on the return of Leah, if the situation looked threatening.

It was now ten days since she had left. Their parting had been stiff and unforgiving. There had been a brief message to announce her arrival. It had had the overtones of a formal communiqué.

He sat down again at his desk, it was already well into the evening, but he had nothing to attract him to go home. One of the Steinbecker cousins was his housekeeper, the children were in her capable hands. She had declaring that they needed looking after. The implication was that their father was quite incapable of doing so. Marcus had the private opinion that his outspoken cousin had never grown out of playing with dolls and if they lived and breathed, so much the better. He had to admit it was the best thing for the children. He was no company for them. These days, he was always exhausted when he returned home and inclined to act like a bear with a sore head.

He fingered through the sheaf of papers and extracted one. It was a communiqué from Asher's Administration about some mutual problem on the border in South East Asia where their responsibilities met. He felt a surge of impatience, it was something one of his aides could easily decide. His hand hovered over the control to call his secretary to him. A dressing down was indicated! Was he expected to do their work as well as his own? He let his hand drop wearily, not only was he too tired to even get angry, but there was something intriguing about the communiqué. It had been signed by Michael ben Levi. That in itself was not unusual, he was, after all, Asher's assistant. It was the title beneath the signature which caused his eyes to widen. It read: Acting Administrator.

Marcus leaned back in his chair and closed his eyes wearily. He wondered if Michael had appointed himself. If Asher had had a stroke, he might not be well enough to delegate his authority to his assistant. On the other hand, matters concerning the Administrators was something one of the Kings and Priests would normally arrange - but these days, they were seen very rarely.

Marcus stood up again and acknowledged that he was too tired to continue. He walked out into the main room which normally housed a half dozen assistants, it was deserted. His face twitched into an ironic smile, they had all run home to the comfort of their fires and he was the only fool left to do the work!

He descended to the lowest level of the building. An icy blast greeted him as he emerged into the parking lot in search of a Pod. It was a sign of the times that the parking area was no longer climatically controlled like the remainder of the Administration Building. It was a matter of economy and the conservation of dwindling resources. The global grid which had ensured a plentiful supply of power during the Kingdom, was now hard pressed to meet the demand. The long strings of solar collectors across the wide plains of the

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earth, were now starved of sufficient sunlight to ensure an adequate supply. The sevenfold brilliance of the sun was slowly ebbing down to what the scientists described as: 'the pre-Kingdom norm.' The supplemental take up from the moon, whose light had also dwindled away to the: 'pre-Kingdom norm.', was now non-existent. During the hours of the night, it actually cost more power to run the generators, than was derived from the fitful light of the full moon. Compounding the problem was a greatly increased cloud cover in areas which had once been clear.

Marcus activated the Pod and thought grimly of the situation which would emerge if the power grid was to fail. Quite apart from the obvious discomfort of no domestic services; industry would falter; utilities would grind to a halt - and even the Pod transport system would cease to function. He made a mental note to formulate a plan to deal with such an emergency. Bitterly, he wondered why nobody else was capable of thinking about these things - or if they were, why they didn't open their mouths and say something.

The Pod lurched though the buffeting effect of the blizzard. The winds were particularly fierce as the Pod left the comparative shelter of the artificial canyons between the tall buildings of the city and was exposed to the open sea near Pringle's Head. The headland itself was shrouded in darkness. The lights of the Pod reflected back from a curtain of driven snow pellets. It didn't take much stretch of the imagination to assume that it must have been like this when the fearful conditions of the nuclear winter had prevailed and some of his ancestors had struggled to emerge from holes in the ground to start a new life amidst the residual radiation.

The Pod lurched over the ridge and down into the shelter of the Old Capital. It made better time traversing the sheltered channels between the structures. It staggered again, when it emerged to make the climb up the lower slopes towards his house in the hills. He wondered if he was being wise to try to go home. It might have been better if he had stayed in the Administration Building overnight.

There was a streak of perversity in his nature. He was not going to allow himself to be beaten by the storm - it would be too much like allowing himself to be beaten by Satan! A blast of wind hit the Pod and for a moment, he wondered if it would overturn. He twisted his face into a humourless grin. One thing he had discovered through bitter experience during the last three years, Satan was always listening and watching for any exhibition of defiance!

The Pod battled its way through the valleys which led to his home. It was impossible to make out any landscape features. He was tempted to turn back. The storm was getting worse and the thin shell of the Pod was all that stood between him and being frozen to death on the bleak hillsides. His earlier thoughts about the failure of the power supplies resurfaced and with them a growing feeling of anxiety. He forced himself to remain calm as the vehicle shuddered and fought against the wind. It was more than likely that he was trying to make the system work outside of the design tolerance. It would have needed a technician to reassure him - he had no idea.

Progress was slow, but there was still progress. He peered out of the clogged windows and tried to get his bearings. He thought he recognised a landmark which told him he was more than half way to the sanctuary of his home, he prayed that it wasn't wishful thinking. He activated the computer interface.

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"Provide E.T.A."

"Provision of E.T.A. Is not possible."

Marcus stared at the console. It was a new variation on the theme of general incompetence.

"For what reason?"

"Too many random variables to provide an accurate E.T.A."

Marcus exhaled his breath slowly and considered whether it was wise to pursue the subject. He had the feeling that conditions were even worse than he expected, especially if the computer was becoming pessimistic. Perhaps, it was better not to have the answer. He closed down the interface and stared out of the forward window. He wasn't sure if it was his imagination, but the Pod seemed to be losing forward motion. It wasn't a question of drag from the snow surface beneath them, for the Pod system operated above ground level. Power was obtained from a microwave grid, which theoretically could not be affected by weather conditions, no matter how adverse. Only a failure of the power source could cause a serious malfunction. Marcus glanced at the lighting and it appeared to be as bright as usual. It was the extent of his technical knowledge concerning the system. He reminded himself that he was an Administrator - not a Pod Transit System expert!

He was sure that the Pod was hovering! There was no impression of forward motion at all. The cone of light from the windows reflected only a curtain of wind-driven snow. He felt as if he was suspended between heaven and hell! Even that was inaccurate - there was no heaven and hell - at least, not in that sense!

He felt total isolation, as if separated from possible contact with his fellow man. For a few moments, he wondered if he would ever have contact again. He pushed down the surge of anxiety and tried to master his panic. Panic was the product of the Evil One! He felt himself under attack! Anxiety and fear were a product of Satan's release. He would not succumb to the onslaught! He would fight down his base nature! If he thought this was isolation, then it was only a minute foretaste of what it would be like to be cast out from the presence of God and to experience the utter separation of the Second Death.

His thoughts were not a good diet upon which to build confidence. It was probably fortunate that the Pod chose that moment to lurch forward and give the impression of gaining speed. He peered out of the front windows and thought he saw lights ahead. If he wasn't imagining things, the lights could only mean one thing - he was home!

The Pod approached his house at something like normal speed. It was deceptively quiet in the shelter of the building. The vehicle came to a halt and he fumbled to open the outer door. His fingers were so stiff, he wondered if they would ever be supple again. He met the icy blast and braced himself against it. He looked up at the building, the upper story was in darkness. He stared hard at each window, he always had the feeling of watching eyes whenever he came or went and these days, he always felt defensive when he returned to enter his own home.

As he stood waiting, the entrance door was activated from inside. He slowly mounted the steps towards the tall woman who stood waiting.

"Greetings, cousin Rebecca."

"Greetings, cousin Marcus. I was becoming a little concerned."

"Concerned?"

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"Yes, Marcus - you are very late - and the weather conditions - "

"I'm sure Central Control could have told you exactly where I was at any given time, Rebecca!"

He didn't intend to sound so uncompromising, but of late, Rebecca was bringing out the worst in him. He saw a momentary stiffening.

"The children are in bed."

"Good - it's late."

"You look exhausted, Marcus - I have a meal waiting for you."

"I'm too tired to eat - I'll go straight to bed!"

He knew he was being brusque and Rebecca certainly didn't deserve the rough side of his tongue, but there was something about her solicitude which nettled him - it would have been different if it had been Leah standing there - but Leah was half way across the world offering consolation to someone else.

He mounted the stairs to the upper floor, conscious of Rebecca standing ramrod straight in the centre of the foyer.

## 2.

Asher's breathing was harsh and laboured, it filled the otherwise silent room. Leah moved for the first time in hours, she was stiff and cold and Jerusalem had not escaped the return to wintry conditions. The laboured breathing was Asher's only movement. She had held his hand in hers and it had remained limp. She wasn't even sure that he knew she was there, he had given no sign of recognition since her arrival ten days previously.

During that time, there had been a procession of advisers to the bedside of the stricken man. They had been full of words but had provided little physical help. They produced assurances that Asher was quite comfortable and they were of the earnest opinion that the sickness would have to take its course. It told Michael and Leah nothing they didn't already know.

They faced an undisputed problem. There were no true physicians anymore. Medical knowledge had become a matter of theory. During the years of the Kingdom, there had been little need for doctors. Sickness and death had been almost non-existent, especially during the centuries after the last of the Survivors had passed away. Michael knew a little when it came to the maladies of those who were high in their years, but he was completely at a loss when it came to dealing something as serious as that which had stricken Asher.

The immediate problem had been to identify what had caused the old man to suddenly collapse. There had been a frantic scrolling through the ancient, inadequate medical records held on the computer, before a diagnosis could be made. Eventually, it was decided that there was little doubt that Asher ben Jacobi had suffered a massive cerebral haemorrhage which had left his limbs totally paralysed.

The recumbent man coughed and jerked a little. It sounded as if there was an accumulation of fluid in the lungs. Leah watched him anxiously, not

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knowing what she could do to help. The coughing fit subsided and he was as motionless as before. She closed her eyes wearily, it was already late in the evening of this, the tenth day of her stay in Jerusalem.

She thought of Marcus, a half world away, there the day would have barely started. He would be at the Administration Building, wrestling with the growing problems in which he had refused to allow her to assist. She felt of more use to Asher, even though she was helpless to ease his physical condition. At least, she could sit at his bedside and hold his hand and hope that he did know that she was there.

Her children would be with Rebecca. Now, there was someone Marcus should have married. Rebecca was nearer to Marcus's age, she was forthright with her opinions and stood no nonsense when it came to expressing her point of view. She was totally unawed by her Administrator cousin and quite capable of asserting her rights. She was also completely under the spell of John and Rachael who knew precisely how to twist her around their tiny fingers. Leah smiled wistfully, she loved her children. It troubled her that she and Marcus had moved so far apart.

The door panel slid across and a shaft of light was broken by the shape of someone entering the room.

"Why are you sitting in the dark, Leah?"

It was a voice full of consideration and there was something else. From the moment she had arrived in Jerusalem, she had sensed something different in her relationship with Michael Ben Levi. It was a difference she had managed to keep at a distance, something she didn't care to allow to develop.

"I hadn't realised the light had gone."

"The sun set four hours ago! Did you fall asleep?"

"No - No, I was thinking of John and Rachael - and home."

Michael switched on a low light to one side of the room, it was shaded from the figure in the bed. He sat down opposite her.

"Marcus will be missing you."

"Perhaps. - He keeps himself very busy. Sometimes, I wonder if he remembers that I'm there."

As soon as it was spoken, she wished she hadn't made the comment. She laughed a little, trying to make it into a joke. Michael smiled slightly in response.

"How is Asher?"

She was glad of the opportunity to turn the conversation to the safety of neutral ground.

"I don't like the sound of his breathing - and he is coughing a lot more."

Michael rose and walked over to the bedside. He watched Asher intently. The breathing was heavy and rasping and there was evidence of the build up of lung fluid.

"In the days before the Kingdom, they knew how to deal with this condition. I feel so helpless, Leah. I have no idea what to do."

"Neither do any of the others who have come to visit him - isn't there anyone else?"

"Not in Jerusalem."

"What about the other Administrators - haven't they got someone?"

Michael hesitated.

"I haven't made it generally known just how serious is Asher's

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condition."

"Why on earth not!?"

"Call it political, Leah. There are signs of unrest to our north! You know what we are expecting!"

She stared at him.

"Michael! Nothing is going to stop Gog or his Horde when the time is ripe! In the meantime, Asher is dying and he deserves better than to be left to do so!"

Michael swung round, his dark face had flushed and he was defensively angry.

"Do you think I'm leaving him to die, Leah? I love this man! He's like a father to me! Do you realise how grossly unfair you are to make such a comment!"

Leah didn't retreat.

"And I love him too, Michael! I don't believe you're thinking straight! Asher's life is the first consideration. I don't care about your - politics - or whatever you want to call them - make an appeal to the other Administrators - Don't take the responsibility for Asher's death on your shoulders!"

They glared at each other, almost nose to nose. It was almost inevitable that he should lean forward and kiss her full on the lips. After a few seconds she pulled away.

"You had no right to do that, Michael ben Levi!"

"No! You are quite right - I didn't have any right - but I'm glad I did!"

He walked to the door and looked back as he left the room. He grinned at her and then made his exit. Leah sat down slowly by the bedside and looked sharply at the witness to what had happened. Asher's chest rose and fell and he stared at the ceiling. She took his hand, but there wasn't the slightest evidence of reaction to her pressure on it.

She hoped Michael would be stirred into action. Asher was losing the fight, slowly his strength was ebbing away. She felt a surge of real fear. If they were to lose Asher, they would lose the one man who could hold together a coalition to combat the rising power of Gog.

It soon became apparent that Michael had listened to her. Over the next few days, there was a trickle of response to the urgent message Michael had elected to issue to the other Administrators. Most of the replies expressed regret, they had no one with expertise. One or two of the others offered advice but nothing else. It was Joshua Aristides who arrived unexpectedly on the second day, with two elderly men in tow.

Michael had visited the sickroom and had calmly announced the news of their expected arrival without further comment. Leah sensed that for some unexplained reason, he was as inwardly disturbed by the projected visit as she was herself.

She was left to plan her own strategy on how to deal with Joshua. It was obvious that there was no way she could avoid meeting him without creating a diplomatic incident - and she was quite certain that Marcus would not favour that. It was of no consequence what the private history between them had been. Ever since the end of the Kingdom and the beginning of the subsequent strains on the relationships between the Administrators, there had been a concerted effort to tread the diplomatic paths as if on eggshells.

She decided to let events take their course and if she could be said to have any plan at all, it was that she would make no plans and handle

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everything spontaneously. It so happened that the first meeting with Joshua was in the company of Michael and his two experts - and of course, Asher. Joshua drew her to one side when it was clear that the other three wanted to examine the patient.

"Leah, my dear, I am so happy to see you again. I might have known that you would come to Asher's side when he needed you the most! I presume that Marcus is not with you? I thought not - I would hardly expect he was - I suppose you are out of touch with the latest developments, but there is evidence of a problem along the Arctic coast. Millions are moving southward - not so much into East Asia, but into the Heartland. They are moving south and west. As yet, they couldn't be described as Gog's Horde, but they're hungry, cold and exhausted. Marcus would surely be watching them with some anxiety - as are we all.

Poor Asher! I'm shocked to find him in this condition. I thank God he has Michael! He is a good man, who had the good sense to call for help when it was needed."

Leah looked at Michael and the two visitors, they had straightened up from their examination and were now engaged in earnest conversation.

"I agree, Joshua. Michael is a good man and Asher is blessed to have him. Tell me, how is your mother?"

Joshua twisted his face wryly.

"I'm sad to say that my little tyrant is very frail. It is surely one of the hardest things we have to endure in this time, the increasing frailty of our old ones. Especially, when they were once so vibrant and active despite their high ages. Maman is always very tired. She rests and sleeps her days away - and I think she longs for the time when she will be released from her mortal body.

It is very hard for the elderly, but it is even hard for men of my age. I begin to feel my years - I suppose my good friend and brother Marcus finds it the same? Of course! He has a wife to keep him young! I was foolish enough to allow the opportunity to pass me by!"

Leah forced a smile, it was not the direction in which she wanted the conversation to proceed. The three men left the bedside and joined them near the window. They looked solemn. One of Joshua's men acted as spokesman.

"We have very little expertise with the condition of the Administrator. It would seem that he has suffered a total loss of movement to both sides of the body. Sadly, we have come to the conclusion that it is a condition from which we could hardly expect him to recover! There is a further complication. His lungs are filling with fluid. He is suffering from pneumonia and the heart appears to be weakening - "

There was a moment of shocked silence, which Joshua broke.

"And what do you intend to do about his condition?"

His two advisers looked at each other. Joshua snapped:

"I see! You intend to do nothing! I did not bring you here to have nothing done! Asher ben Jacobi is a man who cannot be written off! I will not permit it!"

"Sir - we have no means to assist him! He needs medication but there is nothing within our knowledge."

"Nonsense! Scripture records that there is a herb for every ill!"

"I am aware of that, sir - but we do not know which herb to apply - or

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where it can be found - or how to identify them! We are ignorant of these things because they were never required during the years of the Kingdom! The knowledge has been lost!"

Joshua glared at them in frustration and then turned aside. He said softly.

"The very blessing of good health we enjoyed under the care of the Kings and Priests, now works against us. We took pains to preserve the knowledge of mechanics and the other physical sciences, because we realised that we had to utilise them for our own comfort. No one became ill, there was no disease, and so we neglected to preserve the knowledge of how to deal with medical and surgical conditions - May God help us when we have warfare and the wounds of the combatants will need attention!"

He walked to the side of the bed and stared down at Asher. The recumbent figure gave no recognition. There were tears in his eyes when he turned away.

"We have such an urgent need for this man! Something must be done - anything!"

"We can offer no suggestions, Mr. Aristides. His condition is beyond our capabilities."

There was no point in further discussion, after a while, the four men left and Leah was left alone with the old man. She felt defeat rising within her - they were going to lose Asher ben Jacobi.

He lingered for another ten days. His condition slowly deteriorated and his friends watched helplessly as he slipped away. In the evening of the tenth day, the sound of his rasping breathing was finally stilled. Leah placed the hand she had been holding across his chest and then placed the other over it. The two men with her in the room remained motionless in the subdued light. She looked up at them and was mildly surprised to see the tears streaming down Joshua's face. Michael's features were set in granite.

The men covered Asher's face with the sheet and then the trio went out of the room of death. Joshua struggled to find something to say.

"I'm still not used to death - "

Michael's response was almost strident in its harshness.

"Are any of us? I fancy we'll see a great deal more in the days to come."

They entered Asher's study, a small side lamp cast shadows. A man stood by the window. He turned as they entered but said nothing. It was a reflex action which caused them to drop to their knees. Leah found herself stammering.

"Asher is dead, Lord - If you had been here, he wouldn't have died!"

The Firstling reached out his hand and touched her head. She started to weep quietly, it was something she couldn't control.

"Release your sorrow, my sister - your heart has been heavy for so long. Your friend and father, Asher, has found his place of rest. Do you wish to deny him his release from suffering? He is not Lazarus of Bethany over whom our Lord wept when similar words were spoken to him by the mourning sister, Mary. Asher Ben Jacobi has completed his journey on this earth. He is already busy with other tasks. Now is the time for Scripture to be fulfilled.

'At that moment Michael shall appear.

Michael the great captain.

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who stands guard over your fellow-countrymen;  
and there will be a time of distress  
such as has never been  
since they became a nation till that moment."

The Firstling walked to Michael and stretched out his hand. Michael took it and scrambled to his feet. Leah could see that he was physically shaking.

"You may be sure that he whose name you bear - Michael the Angel Prince - will stand with you in the battle to come. Be strong! Be valiant! Stand up for your people, Michael ben Levi! Remember, to the sons of Levi was given the priestly tasks. You bear an illustrious name and the battle to come will be a battle for priests and holy men!"

The Firstling's figure was radiant, it increased the subdued lighting. Leah cried out and she thought her companions did also - and then the radiance subsided. There was a few moments of confusion before Michael touched the room's main lighting control. Joshua was trying to scramble to his feet, he was weeping again. He cried out:

"- And I thought the Kingdom had been taken from us. Our Father is wonderful and His goodness exceedingly great! He has shown us that he is still with us. My dear brother Michael, there can be no doubt that you have received a Godly commission. You can be sure that you will have my support in whatever is to come!"

He grasped Michael's hand in both of his. Leah watched them, she felt peculiarly detached. The Firstling's touch had freed her from something. It was almost as if she had been released from the feeling of strong emotion. Everything seemed so clear to her, but yet she knew that nothing had been altered in her life and she still faced the same problems and questions she had brought with her to Jerusalem. Michael asked:

"Do either of you know where the quotation is in scripture?"

Leah looked at her two companions.

"I feel that this isn't the proper time to search for biblical texts."

Michael nodded agreement.

"You're right, Leah. Asher's death has to be announced - and we have to make arrangements for his Committal."

Joshua declared enthusiastically.

"And we will both help you, Michael!"

Leah watched them quietly. The earlier feeling of detachment remained. The dialogue between the two men was almost trite, it sounded contrived, like stiffly spoken phrases from a second rate melodrama.

It was some hours before Leah could finally reach the solitude of her room. The dawn light was touching the hills to the east. By this time, the message would have been received in Salem and Marcus would be making preparations for the journey to Jerusalem. She had no doubt that he would come. The death of Asher ben Jacobi was a momentous event and his committal would be an impressive ceremonial.

She was bone weary but knew that she wouldn't sleep even if she went to bed. Instead, she sat in a chair and watched the dawn. She released the barrier of discipline she had imposed so that the arrangements for Asher would not be swamped in a tide of grief. She wept once again, her own private mourning for the man who had once been a father to her and who had

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become so estranged in recent years. It was a quiet grief, something to treasure.

There was a knock at the door. She dried her eyes before touching the control to open the panel. Michael stood in the doorway, he hesitated for a moment and then walked in. She closed the door behind him. He said nothing at first, then:

"I couldn't sleep - and I thought you wouldn't be able to either."

"I was sitting here, thinking of Asher - I wish so much that we could have been reconciled before - "

"He loved you, Leah - but in many ways he could be a stubborn man. I suppose it was an example of 'the evil of his own heart'. It's something we all have, one way or the other. He was very hurt when you ran off to Iberia with Marcus. He wasn't hurt because you went there, you must understand - he was hurt by the deception you both played on him. He had hoped for better things from each of you!"

The colour rose on Leah's cheeks.

"He shut me out, Michael!"

"Just as you first shut him out, Leah!"

He walked to the window and glared out at the increasing light. She could see the tension in his clenched jaw.

"Do we have to deal with old history and old mistakes, Michael?"

He turned back to her.

"No - you're right. We can't mend what has happened."

She nodded sadly.

"We can't undo old mistakes - they stay to haunt us."

He sat down close to her.

"Tell me, Leah. Are you really happy? Has everything worked out the way you expected?"

She didn't answer quickly.

"Perhaps, nothing ever works out the way we expect. Happiness, like a lot of other things, is relative. Yes, I suppose I'm happy enough. I have two beautiful children and a comfortable life."

Michael broke the pause which followed.

"And - you have Marcus - "

"Yes, I have Marcus."

"He's a very fortunate man - to have someone with him. An Administrator needs the support of a wife and a family."

"Having a crutch standing against the wall isn't the same as using it to help you to walk!"

She couldn't keep the touch of bitterness colouring the words. Michael caught a glimpse of weariness and defeat before she masked her expression again. He moistened his lips.

"Things could have been very different, Leah. If you and I - "

"Old history, Michael! There's nothing to be gained by living with what might have been."

He relaxed.

"I suppose you're right. I think, after all, I'll try to snatch a few minutes sleep before everybody wakes up and starts to panic!"

3.

When Michael had gone, she sat for a moment with her head tilted back and her eyes closed. He had been right, it would have been very different if she and Michael had united. She tried to dismiss the thought as disloyalty to Marcus, but it wouldn't go away. She couldn't deny that she was attracted to Michael and she knew that a great part of that attraction was purely physical. He was young and vital and she longed to be swept up into his arms and to be told that she was loved and desired.

She stood up abruptly and walked to the computer outlet. She activated it:

"Computer: Provide a visual display of texts containing the keyword 'Michael'.

"Data search for the co-ordinate 'Michael' is complete: references are as follows:

'The Book of Daniel, Chapter 10, verse 13.

The Book of Daniel, Chapter 10, verse 21.

The Book of Daniel, Chapter 12, verse 1.

The Book of Jude, verse 9.

The Book of Revelation, Chapter 12, verse 7.'

References are complete."

She stared at the short list. The text the Firstling had quoted was unlikely to be Revelation or Jude, it was something much older. In any case, the texts in the New Testament were familiar and not relevant to the End of Time.

"Computer. Give the visual text of Daniel, Chapters ten, eleven and twelve."

The response was instantaneous. She sat down before the wall screen and slowly activated the scroll. It took some time for her to read through. When she had finished, she started to edit out the earlier verses of Chapter ten. Apart from telling her that the vision took place in the time of Cyrus and during the Babylonian Captivity, it wasn't particularly relevant. It also had the effect of eliminating two of the references to 'Michael'.

She read on through the text. It concerned three more kings who would appear in Persia and with wars against the kingdom of Greece. It was easy to identify the rise of Alexander the great:

'Then there will appear a warrior king. He will rule a vast kingdom and will do what he chooses. But as he is established, his kingdom will be shattered and split up north, south, east and west. It will not pass to his descendants, nor will any of his successors have an empire like his; his kingdom will be torn up by the roots and given to others as well as to them.'

What followed in the text was a confused history of the successors of Alexander, who split his empire between them and engaged in protracted

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wars for supremacy. There was even a hint of someone who could have been identified as the famous Cleopatra. She read on and the history became unfamiliar.

'A contemptible creature will succeed but will not be given recognition as king; yet he will seize the kingdom by dissimulation and intrigue in time of peace. He will sweep away all forces of opposition as he advances, and even the Prince of the Covenant will be broken. He will enter into fraudulent alliances and, although the people behind him are but few, he will rise to power and establish himself in a time of peace. He will overrun the richest districts of the province and succeed in doing what his fathers and forefathers failed to do, distributing spoil, booty, and property to his followers. He will lay his plans against the fortresses, but only for a time.

He will rouse himself in all his strength and courage to lead a great army against the king of the south, but the king of the south will press campaign against him with a very great and numerous army; yet the king of the south will not persist, for traitors will lay their plots. Those who eat at his board will be his undoing; his army will be swept away, and many will fall on the field of battle. The two kings will be bent on mischief and, sitting at the same table, they will lie to each other with advantage to neither. Yet there will be an end to the appointed time.'

Leah paused yet again and stared at the screen. 'An end to the appointed time'. The words in Ezekiel were similar. The words addressed to Gog:

'Be prepared; make ready, you and all the host which has gathered to join you, and hold yourselves in reserve for me. After many days you will be summoned; in years to come you will enter a land restored from ruin.'

The Lord had appointed a time when Gog and his Horde would surge down from the north to spoil a defenceless land.

She returned to an earlier portion of the text.

'For traitors will lay their plots. Those who eat at his board will be his undoing; his army will be swept away, and many will fall on the field of battle. The two kings will be bent on mischief and, sitting at the same table, they will lie to each other with advantage to neither.'

The king of the north and the king of the south will make war against each other, yet, they will sit at the same table and lie to each other. She wondered how many had already sat at the table of the Administrator's conferences and had lied to each other! She shivered, it was rightly described as a time of treachery! She read on:

'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.'

'The Holy Covenant': - Couldn't the Administrators be described as

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such? One would leave the conference and return home to 'work his own will'. She read further, once again, there was a reference to 'the appointed time'.

'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. Armed forces dispatched by him will desecrate the sanctuary and the citadel and do away with the regular offering. And there will be set up the 'abominable thing that causes desolation'.

He will win over by plausible promises those who are ready to condemn the covenant, but the people who are faithful to their God will hold firm and fight back. Wise leaders of the nation will give guidance to the common people; yet for a while they will fall victim to fire and sword, to captivity and pillage. But these victims will not want for help, though small, even if many who join them are insincere. Some of these leaders will themselves fall victim for a time so that they may be tested, refined, and made shining white. Yet there will still be an end to the appointed time.

The king will do what he chooses; he will exalt and magnify himself above every god and against the God of gods he will utter monstrous blasphemies. All will go well with him until the time of wrath ends, for what is determined must be done. He will ignore his ancestral gods, and the god beloved of women; to no god will he pay heed

but will exalt himself above them all. Instead he will honour the god of the citadel, a god unknown to his ancestors, with gold and silver, gems and costly gifts. He will garrison his strong fortresses with aliens, the people of a foreign god. Those whom he favours he will load with honour, putting them in office over the common people and distributing land at a price.'

Leah rubbed her eyes wearily. There was so much she couldn't understand. Events which were yet to happen, the most she could surmise was that there would be a time of unrest before the greatest battle of all - its description came next in the text.

'At the time of the end, he and the king of the south will make feints at one another, and the king of the north will come storming against him with chariots and cavalry and many ships. He will overrun land after land, sweeping over them like a flood, amongst them the fairest of all lands, and tens of thousands shall fall victims. Yet all these lands (including Edom and Moab and the remnants of the Ammonites) will survive his attack. He will reach out to land after land, and Egypt will not escape. He will gain control over her hidden stores of gold and silver and all her treasures; Libyans and Cushites will follow in his train. Then rumours from the east and north will alarm him, and he will depart in a great rage to destroy and exterminate many. He will pitch his royal pavilion between the sea and the holy hill, the fairest of all hills; and he will meet his end with no one to help him.

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At that moment Michael shall appear.  
Michael the great captain,  
who stands guard over your fellow-countrymen;  
and there will be a time of distress such as has never been  
since they became a nation till that moment.  
But at that moment your people will be delivered,  
every one who is written in the book:  
Many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth will wake, some to  
everlasting life and some to the reproach of eternal abhorrence.  
The wise leaders shall shine like the bright  
vault of heaven, and those who have guided the  
people in the true path shall be like the stars for ever and ever.'

Leah leaned back and sighed, there was so much she couldn't understand. So much was still to take place. The onslaught of Gog and his Horde would be preceded by many feints and trial attacks. In the end the great battle would come - the final conflict - and Michael would be in the midst of it.

She felt like Daniel the prophet after reading to the end of the text, she could understand his perplexity. He was told to seal up the words until the Time of the End, then it would be revealed.

'But you, Daniel, keep the word secret and seal the book till the time of the end. Many will be at their wit's end, and punishment will be heavy.'

Leah deactivated the computer station, stood and stretched. She hadn't realised how the time had passed. The sun had risen, it was a clear day, but the brilliance of former times was missing. The sun had lost its power to shine with a sevenfold light and the weather was far more unpredictable. On the western horizon, resting on the hills which hid Jerusalem from her sight, was a line of cloud. As yet, it was far out over the Great Sea.

The rainfall in the old Mediterranean basin had become heavier and it was becoming difficult to pump out the surplus into the Atlantic and the Red Sea. The rivers which emptied the watershed of Europe, were pouring out flood waters from the mountain ranges. The melting snows of spring inflated the volume. It was almost a shock for her to realise that she was thinking in terms of the ancient four seasons, Spring, Summer, Autumn and Winter. The concept of thirteen lunar seasons was becoming a memory.

It was the same everywhere, even in far off Salem, now in the icy grip of winter. The earth was changing and the ancient mastery of Satan's domain was being reasserted. When she thought of Salem, she thought of Marcus. He was either in the last stages of preparation for the journey to Jerusalem, or he had already begun his transit. She felt a peculiar sense of deflation. The prospect of her husband coming to join her raised no feelings of anticipation, let alone joy. She knew she ought to be joyful, but to have simulated it, even to herself, would have lacked honesty.

She thought back to her investigations. The books of Ezekiel and Daniel contained a blueprint for those who were able to unlock their meaning. In the book of Daniel there was almost a blow for blow description of the moves and countermoves of the 'kings' of north, south, east and west. The

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compass directions were pivoted upon the land of Israel. The 'Holy Covenant' was a fifth force, in the centre of a surging unrest of the nations around it.

For a while, the four 'kings' would try to assert their dominance upon each other, but then the time would come when they formed a confederation, as described in Ezekiel and a leader would emerge. Gog would arise in Magog and lead his horde against the Holy Covenant. The Holy Covenant would be without Asher ben Jacobi. An era was at an end and now Michael had to stand up for his people. He would be watched and assessed and those who might have supported Asher, because he was Asher, might be cautious before they threw their weight behind the new Administrator.

The Central Administration had always been regarded as being pivotal. It was by far, the smallest in actual land area and much greater stewardships flanked it on every side. It was pivotal because it contained the city of Jerusalem. It had a symbolic significance which far surpassed its physical status. The death of Asher would be like a cold wind which would blow through the confidence of those who waited the advent of Gog.

Leah was content to rest for the remainder of the day. The long hours at the bedside of Asher had produced a kind of reaction. She hadn't realised how exhausted she had become. She was left alone. No doubt, the new Administrator had his hands full and had no time for socialising. In the evening, a message was delivered. Marcus would join her on the next day.

On the following morning, Leah stood waiting in the reception area of the Salt Sea Terminal. Michael had accepted her request that she should meet her husband alone. She had thought that secretly he was relieved that he didn't have to face Marcus with a simulated welcome. She didn't pretend to be naive and try to persuade herself that she couldn't understand the strain between them, it was quite obvious. On the other hand she felt no sense of victory that she was the cause. Michael had said that things could have been different - but Michael had only himself to blame that they were not.

The suborbiter was late. In the aftermath of the Kingdom, that wasn't unusual. During the Millennium of Peace, it would never have happened. There were a few others waiting for the various arrivals. She recognised no one and was glad. She stood alone, isolated as much by her thoughts as anything else. It was the first time she had had to meet Marcus since their marriage - it was the first time they had been separated. She stopped short at the unbidden thought - the first time she had escaped!

After another quarter hour, she began to feel the first twinges of anxiety. Even allowing for the current laxity, the flight was very late. She glanced at one of the huge monitor screens which fed a continuous stream of information to a normally unheeding public. The suborbiter had left Salem on time and there was no reason to doubt the information. Flight Status showed it as being still in transit and the estimated time of arrival confirmed that it was now twenty-four minutes overdue. Her anxiety began to mount and she didn't take her eyes away from the unchanging monitor screen.

The message, when it did come, was brutally factual. It was yet another piece of changing information and was posted against the Flight Status details. It said quite simply: 'Flight Terminated'!

Leah stared at the huge screen and fought down a rising panic. She forced her legs to walk in the direction of a service counter. The attendant looked up as she approached.

"Can I be of help, sister?"

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Leah steadied herself against the counter.

"I am the wife of the Far East Administrator, Steinbecker, would you please tell me what has happened to his flight from Salem. What does 'Flight Terminated' mean?"

The attendant glanced at the monitor quickly and then back to her. His expression was carefully controlled.

"I will make enquiries, sister. Perhaps, you would like to take a seat?"

He gestured to a door behind him and she hesitated momentarily, before walking through into a small office. It was barely furnished with two chairs and a table. The door closed again and she was left to stare blindly at the blank walls. Part of her mind wanted to play through various scenarios based on the displayed message.

'Flight Terminated' could mean many things and the official to whom she had spoken, was making enquiries. That was the escapist scenario and one she wanted to clasp to herself. There were other implications and they were much more devastating. A flight could be terminated in many different ways. A suborbiter flight was scheduled to depart and arrive at a given destination without deviation. For it not to do so, or to be 'terminated', had fearful implications. She tried to face the possibilities squarely, that much she owed to Marcus. The suborbiter could have exploded, it could have fallen out of its orbital path in an uncontrolled re-entry. It was unlikely that it could have set down safely elsewhere!

The official returned, his face was bleak. He swallowed before he tried to speak. She rescued him.

"What happened? Did it crash - or did it explode."

The young man looked as if was about to cry. Leah faced him outwardly calm, That in itself, was unnerving but yet, he was relieved, he didn't feel capable of handling hysterics.

"I regret to have to tell you that the suborbiter reached apogee - and then - and then failed to reenter - "

Leah nodded slowly.

"I presume you are trying to tell me that it reached the highest point of its flight and then failed to start the downward glide to earth?"

The young man nodded briefly. Leah stared at him.

"So - is it still up there? - What's being done to get it down?"

He cleared his throat.

"I regret to inform you that it lost - it lost - integrity."

Leah closed her eyes.

"I don't understand - What does - losing integrity - imply?"

"I regret to say - "

"Are you trying to tell me that the passengers and crew are dead?"

He cleared his throat again.

"Yes, or no!"

"Yes - Sister Steinbecker. I am so sorry - "

Leah kept her eyes closed. She needed to shut out the world. Curiously, at that moment, she didn't feel grief - she guessed it would come later. Instead, there was a peculiar numbness, it was almost a return of the suppression of emotion she had experienced after the Firstling's touch on the previous evening.

"Sister Steinbecker! Are you all right?"

The young official was fluttering around like a disturbed hen. He was

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even more flustered when she opened her eyes and gently smiled at him. He really did look like a man who was completely out of his depth. She began to feel very, very tired. With the tiredness came the first stirrings of a deep sorrow. She had no desire to display either her tiredness or her grief before the curious eyes of those who would soon gather around her.

"It would be much appreciated if you would please inform the Administrator Michael Ben Levi - and if I could wait here until he comes."

The young man looked uncertain and then scuttled out of the room. Leah closed her eyes again and felt the first tear escape down her cheek.

### 4.

Michael closed the door panel quietly behind him and stood with his back to it. He watched Leah sitting motionless in a chair by the window. It faced out into the great cleft of the valley below the parapet. She gave no indication that she knew he was there. He felt sapped with emotion - first Asher - and now, Marcus Steinbecker. He closed his eyes momentarily and then opened them abruptly. He couldn't allow himself the indulgence of emotion.

"What can you tell me, Michael?"

She HAD known he was there. He walked to the window and knelt by the side of her chair.

"Not a great deal more than we already know. The Flight Control Centres at the Salt Sea and in Salem, both confirm that the suborbiter reached apogee - that's the apex of the orbital path. Everything appeared to be in order. Shortly before it was due to begin the downward curve of the flight - something went wrong. As yet, they don't know what. The suborbiter failed to start the descent and continued outward into space. Ground monitors indicated the loss of integrity about the same time."

Leah nodded slowly.

"What does 'loss of integrity' imply, Michael?"

He hesitated.

"It can mean a lot of things, Leah."

"Tell me what it meant for Marcus!"

"If you wish! - The investigation hasn't progressed very far, but as far as Flight Control could tell, there was a sudden evacuation of the cabin pressure. They believe the cabin skin must have ruptured but they can't pinpoint the cause. For what little consolation it gives, Leah - it would have been over very quickly for the occupants!"

She nodded again.

"Thank you, Michael. I don't need to know more than that - excepting - Why! Why did it happen to Marcus?"

He took her hand and held it between his. She was icy cold.

"I wish I could answer that question, Leah. Marcus will be greatly missed."

He sounded as if he meant it. For the first time, she turned and looked at him. The strain and weariness was very visible.

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"You should rest, Michael - you look worn out!"

"Don't worry about me! I'm concerned about you!"

"I'll be all right, I have a lot to think about. Do you think you could keep everyone away? I don't believe I could cope with a lot of sympathy, just at the moment."

He squeezed her hand, rose to his feet and left her alone. Perhaps her request had been selfish, but for as long as possible, she desperately wanted to maintain the cocoon of remoteness which cloaked her. She tentatively allowed her thoughts to turn to Marcus. She released a few of the less personal memories. Long before she had actually known him, she had known of him. During the three hundred plus years of her existence, he had always been in high profile. He was not only a senior member of the Clan Steinbecker, but especially in recent years, he had enjoyed the confidence of Joel, their patriarch. Where Father Joel had been, Marcus had not been far away. Now, they were both gone and she was beginning to realise that the bottom had dropped out of her existence. Asher was gone too, and he had been the alternative foundation for a significant portion of her life.

She glanced at the chronometer. So little time had passed. In two hours, her life had changed irretrievably. A little over two hours earlier, she had been waiting for a flight which had never arrived. The events of the two hours were at one and the same time, each sharply defined in her memory and yet, disjointed and blurred, as if they had no continuity. After the episode at the spaceport, Michael had collected her and whisked her away to Asher's house.

As yet, there were only a few who knew of Marcus Steinbecker's death. Joshua was in conference with one of the other Administrators and the news could not have reached them. Leah was glad, it was a respite before she had to be strong and face the tide of commiserations.

The news would be circulating in Salem also! She suddenly thought of the children and stood abruptly. She thanked God that Marcus had lacked the imagination to bring them to Jerusalem as a surprise! She was also thankful that they were so young. They had loved their father and without a doubt, would miss him. Her lip quivered and the dam wall of her grief broke.

By the time Joshua had returned, she was dry-eyed again. Her head ached with the act of weeping. She still sat in the chair by the window, as if trying to hold on to the fading light. She suddenly found herself lifted from the chair and clasped against his chest. It was ironic, there would have been a time when she would have been thrilled by such a display of emotion.

Joshua was crying, she could feel the tears soaking into the material of her dress. She wondered who was offering comfort to whom. He drew back from her and she could see the tears furrowing down.

"Oh! My dear, Leah! I am so sorry!"

Her answer was mechanical.

"It was God's will."

He stared at her. She went on.

"It would have to be so, wouldn't it? It couldn't have happened unless He had allowed it!"

He responded cautiously.

"I'm glad you can see it that way, Leah."

"We mustn't weep for Marcus, Joshua! In a few short years, all of us will follow him and he has been spared a great deal of anguish."

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He continued to stare at her.

"What will you do, Leah?"

She hadn't given it much thought, she gave an impromptu answer.

"Go back to Salem I suppose - my children are there. I won't stay for long, I have no desire to be the widow Steinbecker!"

Joshua blinked, she sounded so emotionless. Her tone was hard, almost bitter.

"And what then?"

She shrugged.

"I'll come back to Jerusalem - It's ironic, isn't it? I never did close down my house here. It was something I had intended to do so many times and something always came in between."

Joshua stood in the window recess, his face visible in the last light.

"You could always come to Iberia - "

The answer was crisp and defined.

"I think not, Joshua. I like Jerusalem, it's the centre of things."

"It could be the centre of things in more ways than one. In fact, it could become quite a hot spot - you have your children to consider."

"One of us once made the observation that nothing could alter the coming of Gog and his Horde - or the consequences it would bring for the rest of the earth and the realms of eternity. On that basis, it doesn't much matter where I am or where my children are. In the final analysis, we have only a little way to go before the Time of the End."

He couldn't find anything to say to her, she was so rigidly controlled. If she had wept he could have consoled her - or perhaps, wept with her. If she had looked helpless and incapable, he could have provided the strength she needed. This steely, almost bitter control was unnerving and he felt himself helpless in the face of it.

"Leah, I will always be ready to help you - to offer a home to you and your children if you do decide to leave Salem - or if you have second thoughts about Jerusalem."

"You are very kind, Joshua. I am truly grateful for your concern. I have already made the decision. I will leave Salem, it would hold too many memories for me to remain. I feel in my heart that I must be in Jerusalem until - until everything is over!"

Joshua left soon after. It was already late in the day and she was spared further expressions of sympathy. In the next days there was a steady stream of callers coming and going to the house of Asher ben Jacobi. The demise of two notable Administrators was unusual enough to encourage a greater than usual interest. Michael and Leah were joint recipients of the condolences. They received the callers together and offered refreshments in exchange for expressions of sympathy. Leah was the focus of attention, if only for the bizarre way in which Marcus had died. There was also something about her carefully controlled poise which attracted curiosity. More than one eyed the couple - the darkly, handsome Michael sitting next to his pale faced, beautiful companion and formed private conclusions.

Seven days after Asher had died, he was laid to rest. He provided the mortal remains for the Act of Committal, although it became a memorial service shared with the invisible presence of Marcus. Leah stood with Michael as joint mourner for Asher. She was totally controlled, remote in her composure. A few hours before the ceremony, it had finally been confirmed

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that there was no immediate possibility of recovering the remains of her husband from the erratic orbit of the wrecked suborbiter. It would be his final resting place.

She listened to the words of Asher's eulogy and the various speakers who came forward to add their contribution. There was no mention of Marcus - she accepted the omission. It was as it should be, Asher deserved the respect of being Committed on his own account. Until the very last moments of the ceremony, there was no sign of a Firstling - and then their Kingly-Priest walked into their midst. The crowd had listened silently to the procession of speakers but now the quietness became intensified. They had automatically dropped to their knees.

The Firstling took his place in the centre of the room and looked at them silently. Leah waited until his eyes rested on her. As always, it was a look which burned into her soul. The love and warmth, the caring and consolation, washed over her. Her carefully maintained composure crumbled and she wept without restraint. Michael drew her to him and they knelt together with his arm about her shoulders.

The Firstling approached the bier and looked down at the body. He placed his hand on those of Asher.

"I have listened to your words of memorial for Asher ben Jacobi, and I have agreed with every sentiment. He was a man of resolution and dedication, of fierce loyalty to his God and to his neighbours. He was a product of the Kingdom of Peace and the teaching of all men by our God and Heavenly Father. This mortal shell remains and today will be returned to its physical origin. Already, Asher ben Jacobi has passed into another realm of the eternal Kingdom and is active once more in the tasks which have been allotted to him.

Let us never forget that we are all the recipients of the grace of this Eternal Kingdom of our God. We should not be deluded by those who say that everything has changed and that the Kingdom no longer exists. It is their argument that Satan has been released and has regained his control of this earth and that the Kingdom has been destroyed.

In the visible sense, it cannot be denied that the benevolent conditions, which the earth has enjoyed for a thousand years, have changed. In the invisible sense, nothing has changed, for the Kingdom of God is not bound to the visible but to the invisible. It is not temporal but eternal. Our Lord Jesus once told us that the Kingdom of Heaven is within! The Kingdom therefore remains, and will do so as long as we hold it within our hearts and protect it from the evil activities of the Destroyer.

As always, I counsel you to beware of the Second Death! The time comes, indeed it is at your door, when the great Judge will call you all to account!"

The Kingly-Priest walked through the crowd and left the chamber. Leah heard Michael exhale raggedly. He released her and rose to his feet and then assisted her to stand. He waited until everyone else had also risen.

"Brethren, we have heard the words of comfort expressed by our King and Priest. We can take confidence in his words that the Kingdom remains and that we have a sacred duty to ensure that it continues to live in our hearts until the moment when we are all called to account.

Asher ben Jacobi was described as being a product of the activity of the Lord and his Firstlings during the thousand years of their teaching. We

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are also born of this same instruction. We have experienced the benevolence which was poured out upon us. May we also and finally, be accounted worthy to receive the same commendation as that which Asher has received.

It is now time to return the mortal remains to the dust from which they were created. I bid you to say farewell to our friend and brother!"

Michael took Leah firmly by the arm and led the way from the room. Those carrying the bier followed and then, the rest of the assembly. There were silent crowds flanking the streets of the city, as they led the cortege to the burial place. Leah thought back of the many times such a procession would have been seen during the long history of the ancient place. Jerusalem would have seen the passing of many kings and mighty people. Asher was no less than they and perhaps, greater than some.

She walked for Marcus too - the same ceremony would not - could not - be repeated for him. She wondered how it was in far off Salem and knew that with the committal of Asher, there was no longer an excuse to remain away. She listened to Michael intoning the words of the Act of Committal and watched him perform the simple process of farewell. He didn't look the patriarch, he looked more like one of the warrior kings of Israel - a David, perhaps. He faced the same, almost insurmountable odds as the ancient king - but he also could place his trust in the Almighty and know that if God was for him, who could be against him!

Suddenly, she felt impatient to return to Salem and see out the trauma which awaited her there and then, to hasten back to this city set in the navel of the world. She was more than ever convinced that this was the place she had to be when the End of all things came upon them. Across the circle of mourners, she sensed Joshua Aristides watching her. She didn't look in his direction. He had appeared to avoid her since she had declined his offer to return to Iberia. It was a typical reaction. She was a little surprised that she could see it so clearly. She was also a little astounded that she hadn't recognised Joshua for what he had always been and had fancied herself to be so much in love with him.

Some hours later, in the quietness of what had been Asher's home, she was finally able to sit and relax. There had been the usual gathering which always followed a Committal. There had been final reminiscences and appreciative words on the worth of the dearly departed. It had been the occasion for some to remember and say nice things about Asher whilst they still had an audience, Now, they were gone and she had sought the refuge of her room.

It was close to sunset. The western sky was clear. It was so like the conditions they had often enjoyed during the years of the Kingdom and it was the time of day which Asher had particularly loved. It was the time when he would sit and watch the shadows lengthen and it was a time when he allowed his thoughts to run free. Leah smiled a little. He had had wonderful thoughts; wonderful schemes to be planned - but they were never more than pipe-dreams which he would acknowledge as such after a while and at which he would roar with laughter when he reflected on them. The sunset in Jerusalem would always remind her of Asher!

She rose and started to select the clothing she intended to take with her to Salem. Her return hadn't been discussed, but she intended to take the suborbiter home. Given the circumstances, she could have been excused for avoiding the method of transit which had taken the life of her husband, but

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she had come to the resolution that she wouldn't take an alternative. It was a final mark of respect for Marcus. She would soar up to where he had died and be close to him for one final moment - just as they had been close to Asher for one final moment earlier in the day - and then silently, she would commit his body to the dust between the stars.

Michael raised no arguments when she told him she had to return to Salem.

"I know you must do it, Leah. I also want you to know that if you do decide to come back to us, you will be more than welcome."

She could read much more in his eyes than what was contained in the words. The same look was there when he kissed her on the forehead in a prim farewell at the Salt Sea Terminal on the following day.

The clamour which had accompanied her arrival in Salem, had almost approached the level of hysteria. The reception area had been crowded with the Clan Steinbecker - most of whom she only knew vaguely. Outside of that solid circle of mournful and consoling faces, there was a greater crowd of other citizens, who could not claim ties of blood. David, Marcus's secretary, had been thrust by the force of circumstances into the forefront. It was he who grasped her hand and couldn't find anything to say at the critical moment.

Others reached out to touch her as if to do so would somehow give her strength. The effect was the contrary, she felt the virtue drain from her, it was as if her strength ebbed away. She looked around for her children but they were nowhere to be seen. It was the most sensible thing someone could have decided and she supposed she had Rebecca to thank for it. She was almost carried through the reception area to a waiting Pod and bundled inside like a package. Somehow, a path was cleared around the vehicle and it moved clear of the pressing crowd. She closed her eyes in exhaustion and David cleared his throat nervously.

"We tried to avoid the crowd, Sister Steinbecker - but somehow, word got out. Actually, there have been some who have been camping at the spaceport for a glimpse of you."

She opened her eyes and stared at him in astonishment.

"Whatever reason could they have for doing that?"

There was another man beyond David, someone she didn't immediately recognise. He interjected in a voice loaded with disdain.

"Sensation seekers, Sister Steinbecker - people pretending to be compassionate."

She switched her gaze to him. He sounded an interesting man. He was a heavy built and solid looking. She judged him to be a few years older than Marcus - she corrected herself - than Marcus had been.

"Where are my children?"

"They waiting for you - at your home, Sister Steinbecker."

David sounded so pathetically eager to please. He added hastily.

"I should introduce you to Brother Kurt Weber."

"I'm not one of your Steinbecker cousins, sister!"

She smiled briefly and nodded.

"Marcus spoke of you many times, brother. You look after the Gazera Province."

His face twitched into a responsive smile.

"I wager Marcus had much to say about me - we rubbed the best out of

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each other - like steel and flint, we made sparks. He was a man I could respect."

They were passing the wall across the headland. She averted her eyes from it. It provoked too many memories. Soon after their marriage, Marcus had continued the tradition of walking there. It was also the place where she had announced her decision to marry him. The Pod was taking a devious, roundabout way from the spaceport to the hills. David volunteered the information.

"The usual route is crowded. Brother Kurt thought a detour - "

Leah nodded, it sounded as if Brother Kurt was called the shots and filling the vacuum left by Marcus. A disjointed phrase crossed her mind: Nature abhors a vacuum. Someone would have to fill the Administrator's place, but that was something which wasn't open for negotiation - or even power grabbing. During the years of the Kingdom, it had been strictly the role of a Firstling to nominate the incumbent.

The strategy of the detour had avoided most of the crowds and soon they entered the security of the grounds of her home. It didn't feel such anymore, perhaps it never had been her home. There was too much history, first Carl and then his son, Joel, and then, more recently, Marcus and his young wife and their children. The continuity should have brought happiness, but particularly since the subtle influence of Satan had been brought to bear, she had felt the weight of the departed earlier occupants. She had had the sensation of being watched and assessed, not only in all she did, but in all she had thought.

Her children were tumbling down the steps from the house towards her. They had broken free of the tall, older woman who had brought them through the main door. Leah stooped down to clutch them into her arms. She was smothered in kisses and exuberance and before they quietened down, she was half laughing and crying.

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She whispered.

"I've missed you so much, my darlings."

John was looking behind her.

"Where's my daddy?"

He was forming his words very well. She groped for words to delay the inevitable explanation.

"I have a lot to tell you about daddy, John. We'll do it later."

"He isn't here! Did you leave him behind?"

"Yes, I had to leave him behind - I'll tell you all about it later - How, is Aunt Rebecca?"

The older woman had descended the steps. Leah looked up at her. She was almost surprised to find an expression of compassion.

"My dear, Leah! How are you?"

"Rebecca - I am reasonably well - thank you for taking such good care of the children."

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"It is always my pleasure, Leah. Come inside - all of you come inside."

As always, the custodian of the house. Leah had only ever been expected to fulfil the role of the dutiful, indolent wife. Leah fought down the long suppressed resentment. For the sake of peace, she had learned to go along with Marcus's wishes. Rebecca had been Joel's housekeeper for almost two centuries before Marcus took over the house. Marcus had once said that she was almost part of the furniture. It was unthinkable that she should be asked to remove herself because Marcus Steinbecker had taken a wife. It was old history - and under the current circumstances, a truce was indicated.

If she thought she had escaped the public view, she was mistaken. A group of Marcus's closest advisers awaited her in solemn silence in the large reception room. She knew them all, latterly, as Marcus's wife, but earlier, on a one to one basis, as his assistant. They approached her one after the other and offered their condolences. She was glad when the mournful procession ended. Ambrose hovered nearby - she liked Ambrose and she knew that Marcus had held him in high regard. He took her by the elbow and edged her towards a corner of the room. He came to the point.

"Quite apart from the personal tragedy and the loss of a fine man, a good husband and father, and a loyal friend, we are beginning to suffer the loss of the clear direction we have come to expect of Marcus."

Leah looked at him sharply. Ambrose went on.

"During the past week, I've received confirmation that what we have feared would happen has started. The last report I made to Marcus was that there was a groundswell of movement of the population around the Lena delta. More worrying for us is, that it isn't confined to the Asia Heartland. Along the whole of the Arctic coastline, there is a mass movement southward. I have lost contact with Georgi Malenski, it would seem that he's on the move too. There have been unconfirmed reports of storage houses along the upper Lena being overrun and stripped of their supplies, as the mob moves southward.

I have organised reception camps for the evacuees from our area, and so far, there hasn't been any suggestion of anarchy. We all realise that a hungry mob recognises no boundary lines or authority. We are faced with a very critical situation, Leah - and we have no one to co-ordinate our response."

"You have David - "

"Ah! David! - "

He left the response hanging in the air and there was no doubt of his opinion.

"You must wait for the Firstling to appoint someone."

"And, when will that be? I asked the question of our Firstling - "

"Do what he says - you can't go wrong."

"He said we must wait - "

"Then - you must wait, Ambrose!"

He looked into her strained face.

"I'm sorry, Leah. I shouldn't be troubling you at a time like this - What will you do?"

She held his arm.

"In the short term, try to make my escape from you all and - and try to tell my children that their father will not be coming back to them!"

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He squeezed her hand and blinked a few times, other than that his Mongolian features showed no emotion. He called the gathering to attention.

"Brothers and colleagues - I think it is time to allow our sister Leah to rest after her journey."

Before there was any attempt to form a procession to say farewell, he led her to the door of the room. She whispered:

"Thank you, Ambrose."

Then louder:

"Thank you all for coming - and for your kind words."

It was strange to walk through the rooms of the house she had shared with Marcus. For the first time, the full realisation of his absence hit her. She closed the door panel of their bedroom behind her and leaned against it. She closed her eyes for a moment. It was very quiet, even the outside noises were shut out by closed windows. She opened her eyes and focused on the large bed they had shared. It was enormous and it seemed ridiculous to think that in future, only one person would use it.

She knew she would have to get away. The essence of Marcus permeated the home in which he had lived for hundreds of years. There was hardly any trace of herself. Her presence had made little impression. It was partly her own fault, for she had brought few of her own possessions to the marriage. The failure to close down her Jerusalem home, had meant that her belongings had remained there. Now, she was glad that she still had a familiar haven to which she could flee. There was a firm knock at the door, even before she opened it, she knew it would be Rebecca. She was a little surprised to find her standing there with a small tray.

"I thought we might take tea together."

"Thank you, Rebecca, that is most kind."

The 'taking of tea' was one of Rebecca's idiosyncrasies. Marcus had always indulged her and had arranged for a personal supply to be imported from one of the more remote corners of his stewardship. The 'taking of tea' had the connotations of a ritual and one which had been intimidating when Leah had first entered Marcus's life. Rebecca would appear at a precise hour, bearing her tray of refreshments, and everything would stop. Leah had always seen it as the stamp of the older woman's dominance in the household.

On this occasion, as always, Rebecca performed her ritual and Leah watched quietly. As well as the beverage, there was a variety of small cakes, which had been prepared with her own hands. It was another gesture of superiority, Leah freely acknowledged her own general incompetence in the culinary arts. Rebecca handed across a cup and a small plate and Leah inclined her head in thanks. The older woman broke the ensuing silence.

"This is a very difficult time for you, my dear."

It sounded like an invitation for confidences, it was atypical of the relationship which existed between them. There had never been open warfare, but they had never been close either.

"Marcus and I were together for such a short time, Rebecca."

"You can rejoice that you brought him such happiness over the past few years - and gave him another family."

Leah sipped her tea and watched her over the rim of the cup.

"He loved John and Rachael very much."

"And you too, Leah! You too!"

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"I'm so glad that others could see it. I know what we shared - our dream was to await the Time of the End together. The Lord has seen otherwise and we cannot question his decision."

"Of course - we cannot question."

Rebecca set down her cup. Leah tensed a little, the preamble was at and end, now the real purpose of the visit was about to be revealed.

"Have you had time to make any plans?"

"Plans?"

"Plans for the future."

"I have a house in Jerusalem."

Rebecca stared at her.

"Surely, you are not seriously considering a return to Jerusalem, Leah!"

"It is one option - amongst others."

"Perhaps, but this is Marcus's home - you are his widow - and our family surrounds you here. The children will be raised in the environment they know!"

"You may well have a point, Rebecca. I shall have to consider my options very carefully. I will need to decide what is best for the children - and for me. None of us doubt that we have only a little time left. Conditions are arising which confirm it. Millions of people are on the move - hungry people - desperate people - and they will soon swarm down on those who have plenty and take it from them. I'm sure that Salem will not be isolated from what is to come - and neither will Jerusalem. Families will count for nothing, nor will our pleasant environment. It won't matter whether I am known as the Widow Steinbecker, or if I am anonymous, when we face the Time of the End."

Leah knew she had frightened her and she had not really intended to do so. Rebecca should have been left to her 'taking of tea' and the running of the ancient, rambling house, which was the Clan Steinbecker focal point. She should have been left to her peaceful thoughts and her garden and left unsuspecting of the hungry mob which would eventually find their way across the mountain barrier. Leah wondered if she had suddenly been endowed with the gift of prophecy, the vision had been so clear that it had even frightened her. Rebecca rose, murmured a few more words, took up her tray and made her exit. Leah watched her leave, leaned back in the chair and fought down an hysterical urge to laugh.

There could be no Act of Committal for Marcus Steinbecker. His body was entombed in the remains of the wrecked suborbiter, which was describing an erratic orbit around the earth. There was more than an even chance that the orbit would decay, in which case, it would burn up on re-entry. The alternative was that the tenuous gravitational tether which held it in its long ellipse, would be disturbed and the wreckage, together with the bodies of Marcus and the others who had died, would begin a long drawn out, ever decreasing spiral into the sun. The end result was equal. The words of Committal would require amendment: Atoms to atoms.

Instead of a Committal, there was to be a memorial gathering. It would be similar to that which had preceded Asher's burial. It was a further extension of the agony of parting for the wife and the children. Leah wished the whole, long drawn out procedure was at an end. The untimely and bizarre method of Marcus's dying, had created an aura of sensationalism. Leah felt as if she and the children were being put on show. Something to be peered at

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and even criticised if it was considered that she was either too emotional for the status she was supposed to enjoy; or on the other hand, too remote and controlled, with the implication that she was uncaring.

On the day following her homecoming, she had taken the children into the garden, even though the day was cold, with the hint of more icy winds to come. The trees were stripped of their leaves and it excited John's attention to the degree that she was compelled to give him a nature lesson before she could turn to breaking the news. In the end, she had managed to merge the two subjects, comparing the apparent death of the trees and shrubs, to that of humans. She had continued the metaphor, describing how life would return. She touched on the life, death and resurrection of Jesus and explained that soon, they would all journey to a realm where there was no such event as winter, or the resurgence of life in the spring. It would be a new heaven and a new earth, a wonderful new creation. Something so wonderful, that she couldn't even describe what it would be like. Almost casually, she concluded.

"Your daddy has been asked to make that journey separately from us, because he has been given some important work to do to help in looking after this old creation, before we all go to join him."

John had stared at her without blinking for a long moment.

"Isn't he coming home to us?"

Leah ensured her voice was steady.

"No, John, he has so much to do. We will go to him instead."

There was a further steady appraisal.

"When do we go?"

"The Lord Jesus and his Firstlings will tell us when to go!"

"Will it be soon?"

"I believe it will be very soon."

John jumped to his feet.

"Come on Rachael! I'm going to look in the pond!"

Leah watched them run towards the small depression which had collected rainwater during the previous days. In it, there were a few tired or half-dead fish, who seemed a little surprised to find themselves where they were and who could hardly be bothered to flick their tails in the icy water. She felt emotionally sapped, but also a little bewildered. She had expected grief and tantrums, instead, there had been a calm acceptance. Perhaps, she hadn't done a very good job, she had balked at the word 'dead'. John had accepted that his father had gone away and would not return, but he still didn't know that he was dead. Rachael was too young to react, barely toddling around in pursuit of her adored older brother. With her it came down to what John accepted, she accepted.

Leah had no one with whom to share her concerns. Rebecca was within call, but she was not the one to share in such confidences. Her husband's friends and colleagues were hardly equipped to give her sound advice - even Ambrose. He was rugged and dependable and a family man, but she doubted if he was an expert when it came to counselling widows on how they should break the news of a father's death to his children. Perhaps, she had done all that was possible. John was not even three - they were both so young.

On the following day there were new arrivals - Gideon and Deborah. They were the children of Marcus's first marriage to Judith. Leah had met them once three years earlier, when they had arrived to witness the

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remarriage of their father to a woman younger than themselves. At that time, there had been an undercurrent, which not even the excitement and festivity of the wedding had been able to disguise. Leah had recognised it as the classic disapproval of older children who did not believe that their father was adult enough to know his own mind on the subject of matrimony.

On this occasion, apart from offering their condolences to their father's widow, they withdrew and placed themselves under the protective wing of their cousin Rebecca. Leah tried to tell herself that it was perfectly normal, Rebecca had practically reared them from infancy.

Dinner that evening, was a guarded and reticent occasion. So much was left unsaid, however Gideon made sure she was aware that he was far from satisfied about the circumstances of Marcus's death. He was almost casual in his approach.

"Of course, there is to be a full investigation into the accident - if we can call it an accident! Even in these times, suborbitors simply do not lose integrity or go into random orbits!"

Leah stared across the table at him. He was very like Marcus in looks, but his attitude was domineering and self-assured.

"I wasn't aware of any special investigation."

Gideon toyed with his food.

"I would assume that it was decided not to trouble you with such details, cousin Leah."

Leah was almost certain that Gideon had initiated the investigation himself - it was the sort of thing she might have expected. Deborah interjected.

"A time of grief and mourning should not be disturbed with this sort of thing."

Leah looked at her steadily. Deborah was, as always, carefully poised. She was a small woman and had none of the physical characteristics of her father. From the very beginning, she had firmly resisted all overtures of friendship from her stepmother. She continued smoothly.

"I'm quite sure you would want to know what happened to my father, Leah."

"That goes without saying, Deborah - I do want to know what happened to my husband - and if it was anything other than an accident, I would want the matter pursued!"

Gideon looked up from his food.

"We can all rest assured on that, cousin Leah."

The Memorial Gathering was scheduled for the evening of the following day and Leah was left in peace to prepare for it. She had awakened alone and cold in the huge bed. In the place where Marcus should have been, there was no depression of his head in the pillow and the bedding was undisturbed. She looked at it for quite a while, reluctant to leave the cocoon of security the bed clothes provided.

The sharing of the bed had become no more than a habit during the previous months. Marcus had always risen early and had retired late. He was constantly exhausted and irritable with his depleted energy. There had been a number of occasions when he had failed as a husband and Leah had been extremely careful not to apply pressure. She was a young and vital woman and Marcus had increasingly become an old and tired man.

Such thoughts didn't contribute to her peace. She shut them out and

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rose to prepare herself for the day's events. She was left to imagine those who would attend the Memorial. David had failed to inform her. He was one of those people who seemed to spend most of his time flitting from one event to the next, trying to salvage something from the preceding disaster. He looked harassed and incompetent - and no doubt was. Leah knew it was an opinion shared by anyone unsympathetic about his woes - and that probably included everybody who had ever become impatient with him. It wasn't the first time that Leah wondered what had made Marcus Steinbecker choose him as his secretary in the first place.

Leah accepted that she was being unfair. David had the almost Herculean task of trying to keep their vast stewardship running at optimum efficiency in the absence of an Administrator. She suspected that people like Ambrose and Kurt Weber were impatient enough to withhold their full co-operation. During the years of the Millennium, it would have been unheard of for them to adopt such an attitude - but this was not the years of the Millennium. Satan worked upon the weaknesses, the impatience, the intolerance in the face of incompetence. There was little sign of covering a brother's weakness. The characters of men had coarsened, had become hard and unrelenting. More and more, there was a disregard for the warning, 'Beware of the Second Death'.

She had plenty of time to think over the conversation at the dinner table. It was sickening to think that someone might have had a hand in the disaster which had taken Marcus's life, but she knew it was a possibility. In the afternoon, Rebecca failed to put in an appearance at the appointed hour for 'the taking tea' and so, Leah was deprived of the dubious pleasure.

In the evening she stood with her children in the Great Hall of the Administration Building. There was little she was asked to do, other than stand in her place with her children on her hand. There was a succession of speakers who repeated much the same phrases as those used for Asher ben Jacobi. She wasn't surprised to see most of the Administrators there - or their immediate deputies. They included Joshua and Michael. It was like a replay of the events which had taken place in Jerusalem, just a few days earlier. As it had been on that occasion, their Kingly-Priest entered towards the end of the ceremony. He had waited and listened to what man had had to say. Like Asher ben Jacobi, Marcus also received a good report. Leah was glad.

There was one more task the Kingly-Priest chose to fulfil.

"Some have asked, 'Who is to occupy his stewardship?'"

Where was a slight pause and his eyes looked from one to the next of the obvious nominees. Ambrose stared at the floor, David seemed to shrink down further on his knees, whilst Kurt Weber stared back fearlessly. The Firstling smiled.

"I am reminded of the story in the First Book of Samuel. The prophet was sent to anoint another king over Israel. The older sons of Jesse were led before him but he said: 'The Lord has not chosen any of these'. Then he asked: 'Are these all?' You know the story - David the shepherd boy was called and the Lord said to Samuel: 'Rise and anoint him: this is the man.'

I also look upon the heart and not the outward appearance. There are many fine men who have loyally supported Marcus Steinbecker and shared with him in the responsibility of his Administration, but I do not choose one of them! I will give you another of the lineage of David.

Michael ben Levi, shall stand in the place of Marcus Steinbecker, as

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he does in the place of Asher ben Jacobi!"

### 6.

It was hard to judge who was more astounded by the Firstling's pronouncement; Michael ben Levi, or the men who had been Marcus Steinbecker's loyal assistants. Certainly, David had been the first to extend his congratulations. Leah wasn't quite sure whether it was genuine pleasure, or sincere gratitude that the choice had not fallen on him. He had the look of a man who had suddenly been relieved of an intolerable burden.

The same couldn't be said of Kurt Weber. Leah watched the fleeting expressions crossing his face. At first, there was sheer astonishment, which had quickly given away to something more like anger, in turn, this had been covered over by a non-expression - an apparent indifference, accompanied by a cool recitation of appropriate words. Leah was fairly sure that Michael hadn't been fooled, but supposing he had, she had every intention of warning him at the earliest opportunity.

Ambrose had glowered from the first, but she thought the motive was less resentment at being passed over, so much as a firm opinion that there was no one in creation who could take the place of Marcus Steinbecker, let alone someone from outside of the ranks of his assistants. His congratulations had been civil enough but they had lacked conviction.

As for the other regional managers, only Paul Vijay had expressed any genuine pleasure. It was almost to be expected, he looked after the region which bordered the eastern boundary of the Central Administration and south-east Asia. There would have been plenty of co-operation between the two Administrations, which paralleled the ancient border of Burma and India, in which Michael and Paul would have been jointly involved.

The more Leah thought about it, the more she realised what a shrewd move had been made by the Firstling. The de facto merging of the two Administrations had created a common southern and eastern frontier to the Administration area of the Asia Heartland. It stretched from where Ambrose had stewardship of the lands along the Arctic; round in a great curve along the Himalayan spine and coextensive mountains to the west; to the coast of the Great Sea. There it bordered the eastern extremity of the area controlled by Joshua Aristides. It was the virtual drawing of the expected battle lines. The boundary over which Gog would come.

Leah made no move to congratulate Michael in the presence of his new lieutenants. She remained in the background for a while and then slipped away with her children. The surprise move had given her a great deal to think about. Her plans to leave Salem and return to Jerusalem, had to be reconsidered. Much would depend on Michael and the first test would be whether he would seek her out for any other reason than to bid her farewell.

It was very late in the evening before his visit took place. He made a special journey from the Administration Building to the great house in the hills. She heard the approaching Pod and waited for him at the main entrance. She was well aware that the rest of the household would take note

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of the late night visitation. She was beyond caring whether it contravened some unwritten rule that newly widowed women should not receive male callers at such an hour.

Michael climbed out of the Pod and she couldn't help smiling a little. The Pod was one of the smaller models and Michael was very tall, he seemed to unfold out of it. He became aware of her standing in the entrance and stood still for a moment. He said nothing as he climbed the steps.

"I was expecting you."

"I hoped you were."

They didn't touch in greeting, instead, he followed her through the main reception room and out on to the balcony looking over the valley. The moon had risen, its image fluttering like a trapped bird behind the broken cloud. The air was cold and still. She apologised.

"Perhaps we ought to sit inside, I had forgotten, it's warmer in Jerusalem."

"Not much!"

"I thought we would have more privacy."

"So, you also live in a house, where the walls have ears."

"I'm not sure about the walls, but there are ears."

"This is a beautiful place - I can see that, even in the dark."

"It's the ancestral home of the Clan Steinbecker - it doesn't go with the Administrator's position!"

Michael nodded and grinned at her bluntness.

"And now it's yours, Leah."

"For a little while - until I make my final decision."

"Your final decision?"

"I told you I had in mind to settle in Jerusalem."

"You did - I thought your decision was final."

"Is anything final, Michael? Life is full of twists and surprises."

"Such as - me being nominated to take your husband's place - as Administrator."

She noticed the amplification.

"You've been given an enormous responsibility. I don't think it's ever happened before - the merging of two Administrations, I mean."

"It hasn't, but then, the Administration areas are hardly along logical lines - they're the product of the way the Kingdom expanded in the earliest days. As far as I am aware, no one ever sat down and said that a particular responsibility started and ended at specific points. It depended on the original talent available from which the choice of the first Administrators was taken. Carl Steinbecker is an obvious example - and Spiros Aristides was another."

"I always thought the twelve Administrations had a particular significance."

"The number twelve you mean? Twelve tribes, twelvefold Apostolate. Perhaps, it was restricted to twelve as a kind of deliberate accident."

"Michael! That is a contradiction in terms."

"Perhaps, but I didn't come here tonight to talk about ancient history, Leah. I want to talk to you about the future."

"I really think we ought to go inside - otherwise I might be accused of trying to kill you off by giving you pneumonia!"

She moved past him and he followed. She wondered if her insistence on the change of venue had been a subconscious attempt to avoid the

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subject. She could see his face more clearly in the lighted room. He looked tired but he also looked determined.

"You want to talk about the future, Michael?"

He leaned back in his chair and closed his eyes. She sat perched on the edge of hers and waited.

"You must be aware of how I feel about you, Leah?"

"Michael, it's far too soon - "

He opened his eyes abruptly.

"I know it's too soon! It doesn't change the way I feel - and have felt for a long time - in fact, since long before you were married - and even before you showed such an interest in Joshua!"

His directness shocked her.

"I didn't realise you knew about Joshua."

"I have eyes in my head, Leah! - I think I've loved you since we were children - but you only saw me as a part of the surroundings. I was always there - your good friend, Michael!"

"There's nothing wrong in being a good friend!"

"I didn't say there was! But I wanted to be your lover not your brother! I longed to hold you and to care for you!"

"You never gave any indication - not in word or deed."

"Because we were bound by those ridiculous rules which demanded that if another man showed an interest, we had to back off! When Joshua dropped out of the picture, I thought I stood a chance - and then it was Marcus!"

"Oh! Michael, I'm so sorry."

"Don't be - but we're not bound by those conventions anymore and I'm not going out of my way to show any delicacy about the recent loss of your husband. You said this isn't the right time - now tell me, when is going to be the right time? Will it be when we're looking at the last day of our existence and still putting off making a decision?"

Leah was very quiet for a moment.

"Marcus once said something similar. He said that if he knew the Day of Judgement was tomorrow, he would still plan for the future and marry today."

"Then, he was a wiser man than I thought! Take his advice, Leah. There is so little time left! I want you and I need you. Come back to Jerusalem with me. Be my partner in every respect. Help me with this double responsibility. Hold my hand. Be my wife and my lover. Bear my children - and I swear, I will love John and Rachael as if they were my own. And I will love you until the End of Time and beyond!"

He was on his feet and he had drawn her up as well. He stared into her upturned face and then pressed his lips against hers. She endured a final, inconclusive struggle between logic and desire - and desire won. Eventually, she pushed him away.

"We must be sensible, Michael!"

"To hell with being sensible!"

"We have to observe a few of the proprieties."

"To satisfy the sensitive egos of others?"

"No! I don't much care who gets shocked if we decide to unite - but I do care that you might be making your future dealings with Marcus's right-hand men more difficult by an unwise political move."

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"Politics!"

"Yes, Michael, politics! You have to deal with these men. You will be facing situations which are going to call for the greatest co-operation between you. If resentment at the way you appropriated Marcus's wife and children impedes that co-operation, you could find that the Firstling's plan will become unworkable - and I won't have that on my conscience!"

Michael released her and they stood without touching.

"What precisely IS the Firstling's plan?"

"I thought it was obvious! Our King and Priest has created a structure so that you can control Gog. The passage in Daniel talks of Michael standing up to defend his people. You have been given millions more to defend. The Firstlings never do anything which doesn't conform with the will of Our Father, and they never do anything which doesn't conform with the ultimate goal. The decision to merge the two Administrations into one, is no idle whim."

Michael took her shoulders between his hands and stared into her face.

"Now, I'm even more sure that I need you, Leah."

She broke free and turned to the window.

"Michael, when you've finished your business here, you must go back to Jerusalem. I can't answer you now - I won't answer! There is so much to be considered and it isn't only how the future might affect your Administration. I want you to leave me to come to a decision. Concentrate on winning over Ambrose and Kurt Weber. They are both good men, but to them you are an unknown quantity. They will test you - you will be expected to measure up to Marcus. There are pressing problems which must be resolved by firm leadership - especially in the areas Ambrose controls. This is the time when you will either win or lose both of these men. I promise you that I won't be too long in making up my mind."

He shrugged his shoulders in defeat.

"If that's the only crumb you can offer me, Leah?"

"It has to be enough, Michael! Now, I think you should leave. The listening ears have heard enough!"

He kissed her on the forehead and allowed her to push him out of the house. He waved again, as he wrapped himself into the Pod and she stood and watched it disappear down the guidance path towards the city. She shivered, the air was cold. She looked back at the house, it was in total darkness excepting for the lighting rooms she had occupied. She had no doubt that the darkened windows concealed at least one watcher. The thought came that those who spied on others liked the darkness.

Michael remained in Salem for another four days, he didn't repeat his visit, but on the second evening, however, she had another visitor. It was Kurt Weber.

He arrived soon after dinner. The lights of his Pod made her pulse increase a little in anticipation of a visit from Michael, she was a little surprised and certainly disappointed when it turned out to be the steward of the Gazera province. Rebecca hovered in the background when she had ushered the big man into the reception room. Nothing was said, but Leah sensed the disapproval.

"Good evening, Sister Steinbecker. Good of you to spare me a little time."

"An unexpected pleasure, Brother Weber. I'm always happy to receive

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a comrade of my late husband."

Rebecca closed the door panel. Her unobtrusive exit somehow focusing attention. Kurt Weber exhaled his breath.

"I can't stand that woman! Not something I should say, of course, but I think it, so I might as well express it!"

"Rebecca has cared for this household for a very long time, brother."

"I apologise if I've offended you - I forgot, she's a cousin of sorts."

"Of sorts, Brother Weber - and you didn't offend me with the truth."

He stabbed a glance at her and then looked away.

"Then, with your permission, I shall come to some more truths, Sister Leah."

She didn't give any sign that she had noticed the lapse into a less formal mode of address.

"Please do."

He rose and moved around the room restlessly, pausing here and there in front of some feature, but she suspected he was concentrating on something other than art treasures. He came to an abrupt stop and then returned to the seat he had occupied.

"I've spent some time today with our new Administrator."

Leah tried to read a message into the announcement.

"I suppose, that was to be expected. Brother Michael would want to come to grips with his new responsibility."

The big man stared at her and then looked away again.

"What is your opinion of the new arrangement?"

"I didn't know I was expected to have one."

He twitched restlessly.

"We all have an opinion - which we're entitled to express."

"Mine might be biased, Brother Weber. I've known Michael ben Levi for a very long time. We practically grew up together in the house of Asher ben Jacobi. So it might be more to the point if I ask for your opinion?"

Kurt Weber nodded slowly, there was a gleam of admiration in his eye.

"That's the Leah Steinbecker I remember! There's something I think you've forgotten, I've known you for a long time too! Before you were Marcus's wife, you were his Assistant. You couldn't be fooled!"

"I remember you as a very loyal and dedicated man - dedicated to your stewardship - and to Marcus. But I don't think we're here for the purpose of forming a mutual admiration society. Why have you come, Kurt Weber?"

He paused for a moment longer.

"To see if something can be done to rectify the potential for disaster!"

"Is that your opinion? The appointment of Michael ben Levi is a disaster?"

"The disaster is bound to come from having Michael Ben Levi placed twenty thousand kilometres away in Jerusalem, or some other part of his far flung responsibility, when we will need him to be with us to handle the Mongolian hordes!"

Leah smiled slightly.

"I could imagine Ambrose's reaction to that description! He mentioned that our Arctic population is on the move - you could hardly described them as Mongolian hordes."

Kurt grunted and waved a hand.

"Call them what you like! It comes back to the same thing. Our brother

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Michael is going to be twenty thousand kilometres away from the action - and we're left here to handle the everyday situation as best we can, with no co-ordination."

Leah eyed him thoughtfully.

"Tell me, Brother Weber. If you had a problem in Gazera, how did Marcus advise you? Surely, he wasn't at your elbow?"

"Of course - we used communications."

"What's the difference with using communications to reach Michael, whether he's eight hundred kilometres away or twenty thousand? No! Brother Weber, you must have some other objection to Michael being nominated by our King and Priest to be the new Administrator. Surely you realise that Brother ben Levi can never be another Marcus, but I can assure you, he is an extremely competent man. So competent, that our Firstling has seen fit to load him with a task which would possibly grind down any other man. He deserves the loyalty of all those who serve as stewards, whether they are of his own choosing, or whether they were the choice of a man who has been taken from us! You mentioned rectifying the potential for disaster. What do you intend to do, make a formal protest to our King and Priest?"

She watched the colour changes come and go on his face. It took some time before he found an answer.

"I suppose it wouldn't do much good."

"It would do no good! Your heart is already an open book to the Lord and his Firstlings. Do you imagine that they don't know your concerns? I think you've forgotten that Michael was not the choice of mere men. Read Daniel; read the twelfth Chapter; there you will find a passage which begins: 'At that moment Michael shall appear, Michael the great captain, who stands guard over your fellow-countrymen.' Read the whole passage, I think you will find it instructive!"

Kurt Weber relaxed back in his chair and stared at her frankly.

"There is a rumour that you're going to leave us, Leah Steinbecker - that you're going to Jerusalem with your children. For what it's worth, I'm going to express another opinion. I think you should stay! We need you here - and I think Michael ben Levi needs you here - if he expects this cumbersome arrangement to work. You have Joel Steinbecker's ability to cut through to the core of the problem. I don't know if Michael ben Levi can do the same, but you'd make a good deputy."

She returned his stare, her face flushed slightly.

"He has a deputy already - David -"

"Pshaw! I must say, our new Administrator made a good start, he moved David back to stamping documents - or whatever he did before Marcus had a flush of blood to the head and appointed him as his secretary. There is no deputy!"

"And I'm not a candidate! There can only be one Administrator and our King and Priest has appointed him!"

Kurt Weber left after a little while. He paused as he entered the Pod and looked back at his friend's widow. She stood at the top of the steps, with her hands clasped in front of her against the wind. Leah Steinbecker had been very quick to jump to the defence of this virtually unknown man - perhaps the rumours were correct after all. Perhaps she was returning to Jerusalem to be with Michael ben Levi!

On the fifth day, Rebecca casually remarked that their new

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Administrator had left for Jerusalem. Leah reacted casually.

"I thought he would have to return soon. I advised him to stay a little longer and consult with some of Marcus's men. Of course, you did know that he visited me a few nights ago - as did Kurt Weber?"

Rebecca set down the tray she had been carrying.

"Leah, it is surely not my business to remark on the comings and goings of late night visitors."

"Rebecca! I am so glad we have always been able to agree on the important things."

The children created a diversion and the potential confrontation was avoided.

A weather front swept down from the Arctic and once again, the hills around Salem were blanketed in powdery snow. Leah and the children were protected within the thick walls of the old house, but even in that comfort, Leah couldn't get the vision of millions of people trekking southward to escape the icy winds. Hungry, desperate people, who would soon turn to violence, to vent their anger against the only authority they knew. These were Kurt Weber's 'Mongolian hordes'. There was no reasoning in those facing starvation. The blame for their condition, even for the changing climate, would be directed against the Administrators and their assistants.

There was little else to do, so she busied herself in the great library which had been started by Carl and bequeathed to his son Joel, and their descendants. She studied the ancient records, dating from the era before the Great Destruction, trying to get some clue of what they could expect from the climate. She gave up after a while, it was too complex and she couldn't be sure that the conditions were reverting back to those which had once existed.

She returned to the scriptures and to her study of the Book of Daniel. She felt sure it held the key. The angel had said, 'Go your way, Daniel, for the words are kept secret and sealed until the time of the end. Many shall purify themselves and be refined, making themselves shining white, but the wicked shall continue in wickedness and none of them shall understand. Only the wise leaders shall understand.'

## 7.

There were still a few fine details to be resolved before the stage was finally set for the emergence of Gog. The movement of peoples from the Arctic settlements spread like an epidemic. Millions began to move south in search of food and shelter. They became increasingly desperate and violent. It became commonplace to receive reports of southern settlements and storage points being overrun and pillaged. The Asian Heartland was the most affected by the upsurge of unrest. The problem was compounded by the lack of central control in the Administration. Alexei Kharkov remained secluded in his headquarters on the Yenesei. He was either too ill, or too overwhelmed by what was happening, to take decisive action. Increasingly, it was his 'governors' who took control and inevitably, it became uncoordinated and unilateral.

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The movement spread into the northern lands controlled by Joshua Aristides. Scandia was the first area to feel the effect together with the lake country which had once been known as Finland. With the drainage of the ancient gulf of Bothnia and the Baltic Sea, a great contiguous landmass had been created. It had been a fertile province in the time of the Kingdom and had attracted many to settle in the new areas. The changing climatic conditions produced an uncontrollable exodus, which surged down on to the North European plain.

Once again, there was a loss of central control. Joshua was rendered impotent in his efforts to reassert the authority of his Administration. There was no infrastructure upon which he could build. It had been swept aside in the tide of hunger and desperation.

In East Asia, Ambrose had managed to contain the worst of the influx from the north. He had thrown open the storehouses. His authority had held and the tide had slowed. He was under no delusions that it was only the fringe of the movement south which had entered his territory. The East Siberian Massive had provided a barrier which only the most determined had tried to cross.

In general terms, the loss of life had been of staggering proportions. In the survivors, it produced the inevitable result of bitterness, disillusionment and withdrawal from the concept of a loving and caring God.

On a daily basis, Leah delayed her decision to return to Jerusalem. Life in the great house was a sheltered cocoon for herself and her children. There were few visitors and when they came they brought only news of gloom and disaster. When they left again, she found it hard to suppress the unrest they had caused. She began to decline any invitation which would take her out into the circle of relatives, friends and acquaintances she had known as the wife of the Administrator. It was a situation others were determined to change. One afternoon, about a month after the return of Michael to Jerusalem, she received an unexpected visitor.

She had heard the Pod arrive and had not moved from her chair in front of a roaring fire. She hoped the visitor was for Rebecca, although it was unlikely. Whoever it was entered the room and stood slightly behind her. She was forced to turn and when she did, she half rose from her chair in surprise - it was Michael. Rebecca had closed the door on them. He moved forward quickly, lifted her the rest of the way from her chair and then kissed her firmly and passionately on the lips. He let her go eventually and laughed at her astonishment.

"You can't imagine how I've dreamed of doing that during the last month!"

"Michael - "

"That's right - Michael! So, you do still remember that I exist?"

"What are you doing here?"

"To the best of my memory, I've just finished kissing the woman I love!"

She jerked herself away from him.

"I told you it was the wrong time."

"Don't tell me - tell my heart! It doesn't agree with you."

"Why are you here?"

"To take you back to Jerusalem."

She sat down again.

"I haven't made my decision."

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"Perhaps, you need someone to make it for you."

"Marcus died only one month ago."

"In these days, a month is a lifetime! Time is running out, Leah! There is so little left, Gog is on the move. All my reports indicate it."

She stared up at him.

"And do they tell you who he is?"

"Not yet, but here and there, there is a coalescence around one leader or the other. We're watching all of them. There are some who think Gog is a collective term for them all - I don't share that opinion. I believe he is one person, he is being raised up and eventually, I will have to face him in the final showdown!"

She shivered.

"You frighten me, Michael."

"Leah Steinbecker has never been frightened in her life!"

"Don't believe that - I'm frightened of Gog and I'm frightened of what - of what might happen to you!"

He grinned in triumph.

"That's the first sign of a thaw in your frozen heart! I knew you loved me - you just had to be shown you did."

"Has anyone ever told you that you are insufferably conceited, Michael ben Levi?"

"Yes they have - but none so prettily as you, my darling Leah!"

She laughed despite herself.

"You are impossible!"

"I know - and I'm also irresistible, handsome, a marvellous lover, I'll make a good husband and father, I have everything going for me."

"You are so wonderfully modest as well!"

He grabbed her wrist and drew her up and kissed her again. She pushed him away and drew breath.

"Stop! I won't be swept away like an opposing army - who do you think I am - Gog?"

He stepped back and grinned.

"I doubt if I'll have the urge to kiss Gog when we meet."

"Be serious, Michael! We're not having children's games!"

"I didn't have children's games in mind either. All right! All right, I'll be - serious."

He pulled a solemn face which made her laugh.

"You see! You laugh at me even when I am being serious!"

"Oh! Michael! What am I going to do with you?"

"Make me deliriously happy and become my wife."

"I don't think so - seriously Michael, it is too soon."

He sobered up and sat down.

"When will it not be too soon, Leah?"

"Michael, I like you - no, it goes much further than that - I think I love you - No! stay where you are! I loved Marcus too, in another way perhaps. I gave him children and our life was - pleasant - together. I need to mourn him for a while. I need to feel comfortable about moving on with my life. At the moment I don't. I said in Jerusalem that I didn't want to be the widow Steinbecker, but now I'm here, I think it might be a good idea if I was simply that - the widow of Marcus Steinbecker who respects the memory of her dead husband."

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Michael stood up and walked to the window. He stared out into the snow covered garden. Leah watched him and her heart ached with longing. It would have been so good to have been with him. He turned back abruptly and caught her looking at him.

"I know you love me, Leah, but I accept that you have to admit this to yourself first. Very well, I can wait until you purge out these feelings you still have for Marcus, but please, don't glamorise what wasn't there. Don't imagine perfection when there was in reality a great deal of pain and frustration. I will keep asking, Leah!"

There was a tone from the door chime. Rebecca had elected to be discrete. Michael took his seat opposite Leah in front of the fire. Rebecca entered with a tray of refreshments which she set down on a side table. Michael rose and took her hand, she looked frankly startled.

"It is very good to see you again, Sister Steinbecker."

Her look of surprise increased, it became fleeting astonishment when he continued.

"I wonder if you could spare the time to sit with us. I am trying to persuade Leah to follow a certain course of action and I thought we might join forces!"

Leah felt her pulse increase. Rebecca slowly took a third seat.

"As you are both aware, I am stationed in Jerusalem. I have been told rather pointedly, that some consider the distance between our two cities to be a disadvantage for the smooth running of the two Administration areas. In normal times, I would be inclined to disagree, but these are far from normal times and I doubt if they will ever return. Our King and Priest nominated me to care for both Administrations and I have taken that to mean merging them. I need strong and competent people to manage both centres - one in Jerusalem and one here. Essentially, they would be my Assistants, but they would have a far greater responsibility than that term implies. They would have the authority of an Administrator and answer only to me. I tell you this because I want Leah to care for Salem!"

Leah stared at Michael and decided that he was a very devious man. One way or the other, he was determined to bind her to him. She was about to decline outright, when Rebecca interjected softly.

"It would mean that Leah will remain in Salem?"

"Of course! Salem will be her centre of operations, just as it was for Marcus and Joel before him. Essentially, she would care for East Asia on my behalf."

Michael was lounging back in his chair and watching her. Leah could see that he was enjoying himself and felt like slapping him. He said softly.

"What do you think, Leah?"

She hesitated. Rebecca interjected again.

"You are well respected by the Stewards, Leah. On the other hand, if you go to Jerusalem as you had planned, you would have no one to care for the children."

Leah returned her gaze without blinking. There was the real reason for the show of support - the children. Michael murmured softly.

"I had no idea that you had made up your mind to return to Jerusalem, Leah. I'm sure I could find you an interesting position there, if that's your choice."

No doubt he could! Leah switched her level gaze to him and read the

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merriment in his eyes. She made the only choice she could.

"I will be happy to assist you here in Salem - until you can make another appointment."

Michael got to his feet and clasped her hand.

"I am delighted, Leah - and I thank you, Rebecca, for being so persuasive."

The older woman got to her feet slowly. She had the feeling she had been used and outmanoeuvred, but she wasn't quite sure how. She bowed in acknowledgement and gathered up the remains of the refreshments, whilst Michael continued to express his gratitude to his new Deputy Administrator. When the door closed behind her, Michael took Leah in his arms and kissed her again. This time, she didn't resist and was content to relax in his arms. He whispered.

"If I can't have you one way, I'll have you another."

"All you've succeeded in doing, is to delay my final decision, Michael!"

On the following day, Leah left the cocoon of the house, to journey to the Administration Building. She was muffled up in thermal clothing against the bitter wind. The snow had stopped, but the air was icy. She couldn't help wondering if it would ever be warm again, and that Satan's grip on the climate was so secure, the warmth could never return. As the Pod pulled away, she saw Rebecca take each of her children by the hand and lead them back into the house. They were chattering together. She had to acknowledge that Rebecca was good with them, but increasingly, she felt the undeclared rivalry for their affections.

Word had already circulated on the wind or on the mysterious grapevine, that she was to return to take over the reins of the Administration. She was greeted, not as the widow Steinbecker, but in her earlier role of Assistant, second only to Marcus during the early months of their marriage. She had to acknowledge that it was good to be back. It soon became obvious how stagnant things had been allowed to become since the removal of David. She felt a mild irritation, it was almost unforgivable for Michael to have removed someone in David's position, without making immediate provisions to replace him.

Her desk was piled high with references to be accessed for reports held on the computer. A sample soon indicated the seriousness of the problems facing Ambrose, it also revealed that there had been no assistance rendered during the previous month. The same applied to the other Stewards, although Ambrose was the most critically affected by far, it was because of his need to absorb the flood of refugees from the north. She decided on an immediate visit to his area.

During the afternoon, there was a request for her attention in the holeroom. Kurt Weber wanted to talk to her. She entered the small, bare room and waited for the wonders of science to create his three dimensional image in the space opposite her chair. She knew it was a reciprocal arrangement, her image was present eight hundred kilometres to the north, in the Gazera headquarters. Kurt eyed her solemnly.

"It would seem that congratulations are in order, Sister Steinbecker. I'm glad someone came to their senses."

"I'm glad someone has pleased you, Brother Weber."

There was the flicker of a smile.

"You'll find that I'm not an easy man to please, Leah - especially in the

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face of incompetence."

"Thanks for the warning!"

"The general situation isn't good."

"So I've been finding out, but I can assure you that circumstances will get worse - in particular, when Gog makes his move. We will rely on good management and a steady nerve."

"It's my understanding that this - Gog - hasn't been identified."

"Correct - but we will recognise him immediately, when he makes his move."

"And until then?"

"We sit tight and handle the problem of our refugee population as best we can. I understand that Ambrose has opened his storehouses and has set up camps."

"God help them! Can you imagine what the Mongolian highlands are like in winter?"

"No - but I intend to find out tomorrow."

He jerked in surprise.

"Better you than me, Leah Steinbecker."

"Marcus would have done nothing less!"

They closed the link and Leah contemplated the empty space. It had been nothing more than a fishing expedition. Kurt Weber had been testing the water.

On the following day, the Shuttle carrying Leah Steinbecker into the Mongolian steppes moved sluggishly across the frozen plains. There was a bland, endless covering of white and she couldn't help comparing it to the memory of the rich yellow harvest which had been produced in previous times. They had come low enough to see the dark smudges of snow covered canvas which sheltered the refugees. The flight had been difficult, nothing seemed to work properly in the freezing atmosphere, she couldn't imagine how hard it would be for the luckless humanity hiding from the wind on the exposed plain.

She was utterly thankful that her children were in warmth and security. She remembered the whispered conversation with John as she left. The little boy had clung to her much more than was usual. Recently, he had become ruggedly independent. His sudden attachment was a little unexpected - but welcome. He had wanted to know.

"Do you have to go away?"

"Yes, I must go and visit uncle Ambrose - you remember him?"

He had nodded. The next questions cut her to the heart.

"You are coming back? You won't stay away for ever - like daddy?"

All she could do was hug him to her as she fought for control.

"I will come back - I won't leave you!"

There had been times during the trip, as the shuttle had lurched through the blizzard over the high mountain barriers, when she had wondered whether Marcus had made a similar promise to the little boy, before he set out on his final journey.

The shuttle was easing in for a landing. It was difficult and the craft bounced a few times in the turbulence. As she walked out into the howling gale, she dreaded the thought of the return flight. Ambrose was waiting for her. He had emerged from a Pod as the shuttle had come to a standstill. He stood hunched and huddled against the wind opposite the door of the ship.

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He grasped her arm without formal greeting and propelled her into the Pod, closing the door quickly. He turned to face her, with ice and frost crusting his straggly beard.

"By all the saints, Leah, you pick lousy weather for travelling!"

"I didn't pick it, Ambrose - it picked me!"

It was true enough, conditions had been deceptively calm when she left Salem. He didn't take her directly to his Yurt, instead they made a long detour through the storm, to several of the camps. He explained.

"There's nothing more I can do to make it easier for them. I give them a daily ration to fill their bellies. I give them enough fuel for their stoves. I come down hard on troublemakers."

"Are there many - troublemakers, I mean?"

He shook his head.

"They're too cold to pick fights with each other - or with me. They use all their energy to fight the weather and keep alive."

"How many are there."

"The number grows all the time. The influx from the north is getting less. A few weeks ago, we had the biggest surge, we worked day and night to contain them and since then, the numbers from the north have gone down. I estimate a minimum of ten thousand in each camp - and we have a hundred camps like this! There are at least a million - and another million unaccounted for!"

"Unaccounted?"

"They either died on the way, or they're trying to brave it out in the north - or they're following Georgi and his crowd, moving to the south-west."

"Have you been in contact with him?"

"Georgi? No - but we know where he's been. His followers aren't so disciplined as these people. I think you can see the nucleus of the mighty Horde, Marcus and Joel before him, were always talking about!"

They had turned aside from the camp and were heading through the storm towards the Yurt. When they arrived, it was a scene of pandemonium. Ambrose shouted above the din.

"We're cramped for room - most of it is set aside for an infirmary. We do what we can for the sick, injured and dying - which isn't much - but they're out of the wind."

Leah greeted Ambrose's wife and some of his children and was then shepherded into his private domain.

"At one time, this room was out of bounds to women - but times are changing."

"That would be the understatement of the millennium."

"You're probably right! So, Leah, they've given you an impossible job!"

"It looks a good deal easier than yours, Ambrose!"

He grunted and poured a stiff measure of some private concoction he distilled on the premises.

"It'll keep out the cold. Drink it down. If you get drunk, we'll put you to bed and keep your secret!"

Leah eyed him thoughtfully, drunk down the liquor in one gulp and started to feel the ice dissolving in her blood. Ambrose raised one eyebrow and poured another.

"What do they think you can do, Leah?"

"You seem to doubt I'm capable of doing anything! I'm filling the space

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left by David."

"That isn't difficult - Michael made a good move when he excused him duty! The problems started when he didn't put anyone else in his place."

"Now he has - me."

"So he has - so he has. Tell me, Leah Steinbecker, what do you intend to do for us?"

"Support you - and co-ordinate the efforts of the Stewards so that you aren't in conflict over the same resources. Save you time and effort. Manage this Administration in the name of the Administrator."

Ambrose grunted again.

"And while you are doing all this, what is he doing?"

"Watching for Gog and preparing for coming troubles. At the same time, the Administrator will be doing what all other Administrators have done in the past; advising, organising, consolidating resources for the optimum benefit of the citizens."

Ambrose stared at her thoughtfully.

"I wish you luck - you and your Administrator!"

## 8.

Leah thought back over the conversations she had had with Ambrose. After the private session in his inner sanctum, she had sat with the family for the evening meal. Compared with previous occasions, the mood was subdued. They were beginning to feel powerless to handle the pressure of events which was building up around them. The strain was beginning to tell. This was confirmed on the following day, when Ambrose bade her farewell. He had faced her, his Mongolian features set in severity.

"Do what you can for us, Leah. You are cut in the same mould as Marcus - perhaps most of the Steinbeckers are. Our situation is holding, but I can't predict for how long. I have a gut feeling that there's worse to come. The conditions in this place have gone back hundreds of years and they're similar to those which faced my ancestors. They had to confront bleak windswept plains. They were nomads, who were forced to move from place to place because of the conditions.

They moved their herds of wild horses and asses to the south with the onset of winter and then north again in the spring. The governing factor was where they could find pasture. This is not a fertile place - not without the benefits of the Kingdom - not without the sevenfold light of the sun and the promise of a harvest in every month. The numbers we have around us here cannot be supported - and I remember Marcus telling us that starvation is a sharp spur!"

She had promised to do what she could - and she had meant what she said. In her heart, she knew it would not be much. Events were moving too fast.

When she arrived back in Salem, she found a message waiting for her from Michael, it was a scripture reference:

Daniel 11:20-24, followed by the words, 'It is beginning.' she made it

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her first task to scroll up the reference. It read:

'A contemptible creature will succeed but will not be given recognition as king. Yet he will seize the kingdom by dissimulation and intrigue in time of peace. He will sweep away all forces of opposition as he advances, and even the Prince of the Covenant will be broken. He will enter into fraudulent alliances and, although the people behind him are but few, he will rise to power and establish himself in a time of peace. He will overrun the richest districts of the province and succeed in doing what his fathers and forefathers failed to do, distributing spoil, booty, and property to his followers. He will lay his plans against the fortresses, but only for a time.'

Leah eased back in her chair and reread the text. The implication was clear enough: For 'king' she transposed a recognised authority. A usurper will arise who will assume control of a specific area. Michael was suggesting that already this was taking place and that this would be Gog!

She could only assume that one of Alexei Kharkov's 'governors' was at last showing his hand. Someone had usurped power, he was not somebody appointed by a Kingly Priest in the usual way, but by hypocrisy and pretence, he had seized power!

It was a question of how far he had got. It appeared as if he had already started to crush localised opposition and to ignore those who still followed the appointed authority. The leader of the appointed authority, that is, Michael, the 'Prince of the Covenant', was powerless to stop him.

In the immediate future, they could expect a great deal of clever political manoeuvring. Gog's power base would initially be quite small but by astute alliances, he would gain strength without resorting to war. This would be followed by a time of consolidation of his power and he would virtually buy followers from the proceeds of what he would appropriate. Within this period of peace, he would start to prepare for the final conquest.

Michael had not identified him, perhaps it was too dangerous to do so, even over the supposedly secure diplomatic channels. There could be no telling to what degree they had been infiltrated. She drew a small amount of consolation that there was still time for her to do something to try to alleviate the suffering in Ambrose's area and this became her immediate priority.

It wasn't the only section of the Far East Administration which experienced difficulties. Reports started to come in of massive problems to the south. Flood waters had broken the dikes along the major rivers of China and India. Millions of people had been swept away and vast areas of urgently needed crops devastated. The pressure was building, it was being applied relentlessly. If she had time to think of the halcyon days which had once existed during the Kingdom, her thoughts seemed more like dreams and fantasies.

She saw little of her children. Her days began early and finished long after they had been put to bed by the ever efficient Rebecca. She snatched a few hours with them when she could; they were precious moments but she couldn't hope to make up for the neglect of other times. She began to feel eased out of her rightful place as their mother and sensed that Rebecca was gradually usurping her authority. It was ironic, as Michael's deputy in Salem, she had almost limitless authority. On the other hand, she was powerless to prevent her children from slipping away from her.

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The great tidal surge of refugees continued. The storehouses under Ambrose's control rapidly became depleted. The only recourse was to open up fresh reserves and organise a massive airlift to the critical areas. The same applied in the flood disaster areas. She soon realised that it could only be a stopgap measure. Despite the over abundance of harvests towards the end of the Kingdom and the building program of storehouses, there had to come a time when even these would be exhausted.

They were approaching the time when the story of Joseph in Egypt no longer applied. The seven lean years which had followed the seven years of plenty, had been finite. After the seven lean years, it could be presumed that the conditions returned to normal. Normality would never return in their days. Their destiny included Gog and his Horde and then the Final Days.

The message from Michael was only one of many problems which required her immediate attention. The rest of the day was spent in trying to grapple with priorities and with conferences with her senior assistants. It was already dark when another report was placed on her desk. It had arrived by special courier, it was for her eyes only. She paused with wrestling with yet another problem of logistics and eyed the deep red, sealed cover. It promised a diversion from other matters, but she hesitated to pick it up. She was almost certain she knew what it contained and intuitively, she knew it was something she didn't want to know.

She opened the seals and extracted a holo-disk. She inserted it into the reader and waited for the images to form. A stranger emerged from the focusing haze of light, a three dimensional image who had stared into the image recorder. The result was almost a lack of interest in the subject matter, which was delivered without emotion. Normally, Leah would have been irritated by the casualness, on this occasion, it tended to reinforce her self-imposed cocoon of restraint.

"These are the findings of an investigation into the causes of an incident involving a special Suborbiter Flight 173, destination Jerusalem, Central Administration Area, at 10.15 hours, Day 269, Year 1003.

The said flight terminated abnormally, with the loss of five persons.

This investigation has been initiated by Gideon Steinbecker, son of one of the deceased.

A preliminary review of the circumstances leading to the abnormal termination of Flight 173 follows:

The flight proceeded normally for fifty-nine minutes and forty-four seconds of the scheduled two hours and ten minute Flight Plan. Predefined in-flight communication was followed. The Suborbiter attained apogee at this point. It then departed from the pre-programmed flight path. The deviation resulted in an irretrievable loss of navigational integrity. Coincidental with this deviation, the vessel lost structural integrity, the cabin depressurized and the crew and passenger expired."

Leah halted the transmission and closed her eyes for a moment. It was a conscious effort to open them again. The death of Marcus had been reduced to a cold-blooded statement - 'the crew and passenger expired'. She knew she was being emotional and unfair. The report was an attempt to find a scientific explanation for a set of circumstances which still remained a mystery. She activated the transmission again.

"The vessel assumed an eccentric orbital path which delayed any attempt for an investigation team to effect a rendezvous. It was found

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necessary to await an appropriate orbital cycle, before a rendezvous could be achieved."

She stopped the recording again and stared at the frozen figure of the official. She had captured him with his mouth slightly open. It made him look a little like a codfish. So - they HAD achieved a rendezvous with the stricken ship! She resumed.

"Investigation of the hull confirmed that it had been ruptured. Examination of the rupture suggests that it was the result of an internal explosion."

She paused the transmission once more. She felt suddenly cold. The implications were becoming clear. She knew that there had always been a number of possibilities as to why the suborbiter had deviated from its flight path and had lost integrity.

The easiest to accept had been that it was the result of an incredibly unlucky accident, perhaps caused by a collision with a meteorite, or even some manmade space junk from over a thousand years earlier, when man was so intent to launch himself into space.

An alternative possibility, had been that there had been a malfunction - an almost unheard of failure - in the suborbiter's power unit, which had caused an explosion.

A third possibility had been the one she had dreaded and found the least easy to accept - sabotage!

She touched the controller and the official came to life and continued.

"Preliminary examination of the ship's controls and motive unit, indicate no malfunction. The deviation from the flight path was as a result of an additional, powerful propellant which originated in an explosion. The same explosion ruptured the outer hull of the vessel!"

Leah closed her eyes once more and this time, the tears flowed down her cheeks. Marcus had been killed in an act of sabotage! He had been assassinated! She listened to the dispassionate voice with eyes shut.

"Traces of explosive material were found at the site of the hull fracture. Preliminary analysis reveals it to be a material used extensively in world-wide mining operations.

Conclusions: The suborbiter was the subject of an act of sabotage by a person or persons not yet identified which caused flight path deviation and the resultant loss of the passenger and crew."

She opened her eyes in time to see the anonymous man fading from the holo-pad. She could have rerun the report. It was standard practice and with other material she might have chosen to do so, with this - the cold-blooded summation of Marcus Steinbecker's death - she couldn't. It was already well into the evening and she felt exhausted - and desperately, she wanted to feel the warm bodies of her children in her arms.

A holo-conference with Michael was scheduled for the following day. She always made it her practice to enter the room which contained the holo-station early. In earlier days, it had been a matter of good manners. In these times, it was a matter of politics. No one liked to be kept waiting and the pre-Kingdom concepts of the value of time, were beginning to dominate the thinking of those who had the responsibility of administering what remained of the Kingdom. On this occasion, there seemed to be a conspiracy to prevent her from entering the room in time for the start of the transmission. There was a succession of irritating trivia, which was brought to her attention

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as if only she could deal with it. By the time she entered the room, her annoyance level had risen to the point of intolerance.

The transmission had already commenced. The image of Michael occupied the space beyond the empty chair which should have housed her before the commencement of the transmission. It was only when she took her place in it, that Michael looked up. He took in her flushed face with a growing smile. He said nothing.

"I'm so sorry, Michael! I was delayed by absolute nonsense. I can assure you that I'll have a lot to say when we're finished!"

He stared at her, the grin broadened.

"You're very beautiful when you're angry, Leah!"

She glared at him.

"I don't think this is the time nor is it the place for that old cliché, Michael!"

He lounged back in his chair.

"I feel like taking you in my arms and kissing away the anger lines!"

She drew in her breathe.

"In which case we can be thankful that twenty thousand kilometres separate us!"

He shook his head mournfully.

"You seem to be determined to take away all life's little pleasures."

"I think we should get down to business and stop wasting valuable power resources!"

He sighed.

"I can see that you're determined to be practical - and there's nothing more determined than a practical woman!"

She opened one of her reports.

"I thought we were going to discuss what else we could do for Ambrose in Mongolia, Soo Ching in China and Paul Vijay in Burma."

Michael's response was almost languid.

"Yes - I suppose we were - I'm sure another minute or two wouldn't make a great deal of difference to the situation. It so happens, I've already taken steps to help Paul and Soo from the resources in Arabia and Japan respectively - and don't tell me it was your responsibility and I ought not to have interfered. I knew you would agree and I wanted to devote this session to other subjects."

She eyed him silently and waited. He went on:

"The situation in northern Asia and Europe is coming to a head - I presume that you've studied my reference to the Book of Daniel?"

She nodded. He went on.

"Events are piling in on top of each other. Things are happening so fast, it's almost impossible to keep everyone up to date. Total anarchy rules from the mouth of the Lena in the east, to the coast of Scandia in the west. There is a disorganised surge of refugees moving southward away from the fearsome weather sweeping down from the Arctic. There is a total collapse of authority and control. The stronger are murdering and pillaging the weaker. They fight over a handful of grain or a half-rotten root, gouged out of the frozen ground. Our storehouses have been pillaged and then left in flames. The only thing slowing the advance to the south is that there are pitched battles taking place between groups which have coalesced around some local leader.

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Joshua has tried to do something on his northern flank but he doesn't have a standing army. He can do very little to stem the tide. As far as Alexei is concerned, there is nothing but total silence. We can only assume the worst, he is either dead, or he is totally isolated. The indications are that the movement of the northern population has already overwhelmed his headquarters on the Yenesei. They are moving southward and westward towards the Himalayas and towards the Urals. We can assume that they will find it hard to cross the Asian peaks, so we can expect the focus of their advance to be towards the Urals and the Russian steppes.

Eventually, they will clash with the movement south from Scandia and when they have settled their differences, a mighty horde will stand poised and ready to surge down on the Mediterranean Basin, the Fertile Crescent and the granaries of Egypt."

Leah saw the exhaustion on his face. She longed to reach out and touch him, but he was twenty thousand kilometres away. He looked at her and smiled.

"We expected it, Leah. I knew that one day, someone would have to tell someone else precisely what I have just told you. It shouldn't be a surprise to us. The problem is that now, the Prince of the Covenant can do nothing to stop them. They are like a forest fire which is burning everything in its path and like a forest fire, it cannot turn back on itself and return. Everything is destroyed behind them, the land has been razed and pillaged. There is only one thing missing to our eyes, and that is a central leader. I suspect that he has already emerged somewhere in that huge body of disorganised people - the chaos is so great that we haven't yet seen him, but when he does come, we will be surprised to find that he is already well established."

They looked at each other in silence for a moment, then Leah leaned forward.

"You believe that Alexei isn't able to function as an Administrator - his headquarters has been overwhelmed. Why do you think that?"

"Because we haven't been able to get a response from them for ten days. The communication links have been disrupted. I have even talked to Grigor Suskov in the Urals. I must say, I didn't get a great deal of co-operation from him. All he would say was that he had not been able to contact Alexei Kharkov for the same period of time. He had sent out scouting parties, some of whom did not return. As yet, he is secure on the European side of the Urals, but on the Asian side, there is chaos. I formed the impression that he didn't really believe what was happening and that it was all a bad dream which would go away as soon as he woke up!"

Leah smiled slightly.

"That sounds like Grigor Suskov. When Marcus talked to him three years ago, he formed the opinion that Grigor and his people saw no reason to change the habits of a thousand years on the supposition that something might change. Grigor Suskov is an ostrich!"

Michael grinned.

"I think you've got the wrong part of the world for ostriches, my darling."

She ignored the endearment.

"So, there isn't much we can do except to try to feed our stricken population and wait for events to come to a head on the Russian steppes?"

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Michael nodded.

"We must wait for Gog - and that timetable isn't in our hands. We know what we can expect, but not when - "

Leah made to rise.

"There's something else, Leah."

She eased back in her chair, she knew what the change of subject implied. Michael eased another folder from beneath the pile he was carrying. It was red, the same colour as that which had contained the holo-disk she had viewed on the previous day. The smile was gone, replaced with such a loving compassion, she felt like weeping without another word being spoken. His voice was very gentle.

"We must deal with this, Leah."

She nodded briefly and leaned back her head.

"I received a copy of this report - as did you - because of the position of authority we both hold. I know the subject is extremely painful for you - as it is for me in a different way. Marcus and I were never really close, but I think I could count him as more than an acquaintance and I am grieved to think that he was a victim of murder. Leah, we must also understand that there are others involved, the crew of the ship. Their families will demand a further investigation. They will call for justice."

She nodded and then found her voice.

"I know, Michael. We will be under very watchful eyes - especially those of Gideon."

"Gideon? - Ah! Marcus's son! I see that he was the one to insist on the investigation - he was perfectly within his rights, of course."

"Of course!"

"You don't like him?"

"Gideon is a self-opinionated windbag! I sometimes wonder how a man like Marcus could sire a son like Gideon - or a daughter like Deborah, for that matter!"

Michael's grin returned. She glared at him.

"What's so amusing?"

"You, my darling! You're beginning to sound like the fictional version of the typical stepmother!"

"You can rest assured that Gideon and Deborah are not the fictional version of poor, downtrodden stepchildren! Both of them have always considered their father was out of his mind to marry a woman young enough to be his granddaughter!"

Michael leaned back in his chair and roared with laughter. A loose leaf from one of his reports fluttered to the floor, it came to rest under Leah's chair.

9.

Leah stared at the sheet of paper and tried to take in the implications. Michael was twenty thousand kilometres away. It was impossible for something he had dropped to find its way under her chair. Michael, his chair,

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his reports, his papers were no more than an image. She half rose, but Michael was quicker. He crossed the holo-pad floor and grasped her by the shoulders. He grinned into her started face and then kissed her very firmly on the lips. After an ineffectual struggle, she jerked free. She almost shouted.

"I don't find this very amusing! No! Keep your hands to yourself. I suppose the whole Administration Building is having a wonderful laugh at my expense?"

He still laughed at her.

"Nobody knows I'm here - apart from your secretary who was part of the conspiracy - hence the delays to keep you from being on time - I'm sure you can rely on his discretion."

"Whether I can rely on his discretion or not, is neither here nor there, Michael! I don't find your little charade very funny!"

"Like I said before - you're beautiful when you're angry!"

"Michael! You have never seen me angry - not really angry - there are very few people who have, but you're getting very close!"

He tried very hard to make his face solemn and gestured to the chairs.

"Shall we continue our conference?"

"I don't think the subject matter is conducive to comedy, Michael!"

The smile in his eyes was gone.

"I can assure you, neither do I, Leah! Perhaps I was wrong, I thought a holo-conference was too cold-blooded. I thought my physical presence might help you."

Her anger had subsided, she took refuge in a businesslike approach.

"We have both read the preliminary investigation report. The suggestion is that some outside agency organised Marcus's assassination. If so, what do you intend to do about it?"

"Perhaps you would prefer to discuss this in your office?"

"If you wish."

He eyed her stiff back as she preceded him the short distance down a corridor to her office. There was no doubt that she was very angry. He closed and sealed the door behind him and remained standing just inside the room. Leah had taken a seat to one side of the large desk. Her usual 'command' chair remained empty, an invitation for him to take it and assume the status of her superior. He ignored the opportunity and instead, placed himself close to her. He took her hand in his and stroked it, she was unresponsive. He whispered softly.

"Leah - I'm so very sorry for acting the fool. I had the best of intentions but my timing was way off. I hadn't intended to reveal my presence until we had finished. I certainly didn't want to trivialise the report of Marcus's death. If for no reason other than that I care too much for you, ever to do that. I hope you believe me!"

Tears trickled down her cheeks and she didn't resist when he cradled her in his arms. For the first time in so many days, she felt secure. She let go of her grief and he rocked her back and forth like a child. She could hear his heart thudding through the thin cloth of his tunic. She felt warm and safe, but she couldn't stay in his arms for ever. She drew back and he let her go.

"I must look a mess. I'm sorry I did that."

"But I'm not! I think we both have to admit that it was much more comfortable to be with you than to watch you weep from twenty thousand kilometres away."

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"Why did you play this stupid game?"

"I thought it was better to travel in secrecy."

"For any particular reason - other than to play games?"

"I would have thought it was obvious. Now we know that Marcus was murdered, we must take extra precautions. At least until we find out who was responsible."

"Can there be any doubt?"

He looked at her sharply.

"Gog, you mean? You might be right - although his motive for murder is obscure. I would have thought his target would more than likely be me - on the other hand, there might be others who wanted to see Marcus dead. We are living in a time when a man makes many enemies - especially Administrators, who are sometimes called upon to make unpopular decisions."

"Surely, that isn't motive enough to kill four men in cold blood?"

"The first murder resulted from Abel taking an unpopular decision - to give the best in offering - his decision provoked Cain's reaction! You mentioned the fact that Marcus wasn't alone. It raises another possibility - perhaps one of the four crew members was the target. We don't know. You asked what I intended to do about it. I'll tell you. I've already initiated an exhaustive investigation of all the circumstances surrounding Marcus's flight.

The investigation will range from the maintenance and inspections which were carried out on the suborbiter; to the intimate lives of each of the crew members. We will look at every decision made by Marcus since the end of the Kingdom and the reactions to such decisions, no matter how trivial. We will have our answers, Leah. I intend to find out who planted the explosives and punish them accordingly!"

Leah shuddered and turned to look out at the cold landscape. An icy wind was sweeping between the bleak towers of the city. The ocean was grey and surging and merged with the cloud covered sky.

"The human race is back to thinking in terms of crime and punishment. Sometimes I look back on the days of the Kingdom and remember our innocence. We were like children who lived in a paradise, nothing ever touched us, unless we allowed it to do so. We knew about the evil of our own hearts, but never realised what a potent force it would become when Satan was once again released. Perhaps, we should have worked harder to control those flashes of irritation. They were ours to master; we can blame no one else for them; they came from within us. They were the fertile ground into which the seeds of discord could be sown and cultivated under the influence of the Evil One."

"We were warned so often on that subject. I suppose we heard the theme so often that we closed our ears."

"We closed our ears to too many things. When I think back to the futile arguments about whether we should store materials for weapons, or whether we had a commission which was restricted to a fair distribution of our resources, I sometimes wonder how we could have been so naive."

"We were as naive as Adam and Eve in paradise. When you have no idea of evil - real evil, that is - you are innocent. When you are innocent - unknowing - of evil, it is so easy to surrender at the first confrontation."

"Now, you sound as if you're saying that Adam and Eve were unfairly tested."

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"No I'm not! They had the warning not to eat of the fruit with which they were tempted - it wasn't because it had a bitter taste, or would poison them physically. Scripture tells us that Eve looked upon it and it was good. In the same way, we have been warned to control the evil of our own hearts - not because it would be nice for God if everyone had no evil in their hearts, but because it would be a fertile ground for Satan to utilise when he was released."

"Why are we talking about Adam and Eve?"

"I have no idea! If I remember rightly, we were talking about who was responsible for Marcus's death. Let's say, there was a subconscious motivation."

"What is that supposed to mean?"

"In plain terms, it means that I'd love to be Adam - if you'll be my Eve!"

She evaded his outstretched hand.

"Let's keep to things on a professional basis!"

"Oh! By all means - let's be professional! I profess my undying love for you, Leah Steinbecker. I profess my desire to have you as my wife; to care for you and protect you. I profess my need for you to come back to Jerusalem with me!"

She retreated to her side of the desk. She steadied her voice.

"I thought we had agreed that it is much too soon even to consider the future. Michael! There's too much at stake! We are being watched - even now. You can't possibly imagine that your presence in Salem hasn't gone unnoticed? This report tells us that the Administration is under attack. I don't believe the target was anyone else than Marcus. Someone decided that they wanted him out of the way. Now, they're watching us - waiting for any slip. By this time, it's all over the Administration Building that Michael ben Levi is in private conference with the Widow Steinbecker, closeted behind sealed doors. I can almost hear the sniggering and whispering behind their hands."

Michael eyed her calmly.

"And are you worried about sniggers and whispers, Leah?"

She flared up angrily.

"Of course I'm worried about sniggers and whispers! I am worried about them if they undermine the effectiveness of the Administration - your Administration! We have enough external troubles without creating more."

"It's easily fixed, you know."

"How - easily fixed?"

"Marry me, Leah!"

"We've talked about this before - It's too soon after Marcus - and then, there's the politics - "

"Don't talk to me about politics!"

"All right - let's talk about being practical. What sort of marriage would it be with you in Jerusalem, twenty thousand kilometres away - and me here."

He stared at her.

"That wasn't what I had in mind."

"So - What did you have in mind? Taking me off to Jerusalem and leaving this arm of your Administration waving in the air like a severed stump?"

"Colourful - very colourful! I had in mind for a wife to be at her husband's side, loving him and supporting him, bearing his children - "

"A very romantic notion, Michael - but I've already been down that road

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with Marcus. You still haven't told me what you intend to do about Salem - if I should be mad enough to accept your proposal."

"We'd get someone else to be my deputy!"

"I suppose you have a list of candidates?"

"I'm sure, if we tried very hard, we could come up with someone suitable."

"Marcus's murderer, perhaps?"

He stared at her.

"That's the point, isn't it, Michael? We don't know who was responsible for his murder. He or she could well be high on our list of possible candidates for the job of Deputy Administrator!"

Michael flicked the sheaf of reports in his hand. He stared at them for a moment.

"Let's draw up a list. Who knows, it might be a starting point for finding our murderer - on the other hand, it might help to convince you that I'm not going to give up Leah. I want you by my side."

"If you want to draw up a list, that's up to you - but don't let it become a finger pointing exercise. The sort of people who will be added to the list are those who are doing the lion's share of keeping your Far Eastern Administration from being drowned in a sea of refugees - that doesn't make them potential murderers!"

"What does make a potential murderer, Leah? There are all sorts of motives for murder. Jealousy, revenge, a self-appointed executioner, ambition, political intrigue - where does it end? Our list might contain someone with some of the motives - such as ambition or political intrigue. It might be a totally different type of person who would be motivated by jealousy, revenge, or being an executioner. I won't form any conclusions on the basis of a list of names!"

"All right - I'll hold you to that comment."

"You can hold me any time, Leah!"

"Behave! Or this meeting is over!"

Michael grinned and sighed.

"You're a hard woman, Leah Steinbecker - but I still love you."

"Michael!"

"All right! - All right! Where do we start with our list."

"Well - there's a whole plethora of Steinbecker cousins - there are some really talented people, doing important jobs. I don't think you'll find your murderer amongst the Steinbeckers."

"Why - Cain killed Abel! On the other hand - we are trying to find someone to replace you - when we marry!"

"We are drawing up a list of hypothetical replacements - nothing more and nothing less!"

"OK We're looking at the hypothetical future, when you are my hypothetical wife and the mother of my hypothetical children! - What's the matter, Leah?"

Her face had gone white, she stared at him wide eyed.

"Marcus said almost the exact words to me three years ago. He was pressing me for an answer too!"

Michael lifted her out of the chair and held her against him. She didn't try to resist. He whispered.

"I'm sorry, my darling - I didn't know."

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She drew away.

"It doesn't matter - let's go on with our list."

She was so taut, like a string drawn too tight and ready to snap. He could say too much, or he could say too little, both ways, he could provoke a breakdown.

Leah made a determined effort to pull herself together.

"Let's start with the senior men: Ambrose Suosin - he has never shown any interest in leaving his Mongolian Steppes. I've always felt he seemed uncomfortable here in Salem."

"Are you trying to tell me that he's a man with no ambitions?"

"I wouldn't say that - he's a man whose ambitions go in another direction. Marcus thought very highly of him and gave him the job of watching Georgi Malenski."

"Ah! Interesting - And what did he find out about our friend Georgi?"

"They were on some committee which was supposed to oversee joint ventures along the Lena. The climatic changes overtook anything they had planned. Ambrose once told Marcus that Georgi was an extremely intense man, very efficient and dedicated. He was almost worshipped by those in his care. He always put their interests first and they knew it - I thought we were talking about Ambrose Suosin."

Michael leaned back in his chair.

"Georgi Malenski interests me. There are reports that he's moving a great flood of refugees towards Western Siberia."

"Ambrose reported the same thing - it coincided with the movement south of our own Arctic population."

"There are some who are suggesting that we are confronted with our mysterious Gog. The latest reports indicate that he was getting close to the Urals. I have a lot of nervous people asking a lot of anxious questions about Georgi Malenski!"

"You should talk to Ambrose about him - he learned to respect him when they worked together on the committee."

Michael said slowly.

"That could be either a plus or a minus for Ambrose Suosin, Leah. How much has he become influenced by that contact - if Malenski does turn out to be Gog, how much has Ambrose been contaminated - enough, perhaps, to organise a suborbiter accident!"

Leah stared at him in horror.

"No! No, Michael! Not Ambrose! He was Marcus's friend, much more than a regional controller. He loved him like a brother. He wouldn't harm Marcus!"

Michael's answer was savage.

"Brothers have been known to kill brothers, Leah!"

"I will never believe it!"

They glared at each other. After a moment Michael waved his hand in a gesture of pacification.

"All right, Leah - have it your way. Who else have we got on our list of candidates?"

"Kurt Weber."

"He looks after the northern half of the Homeland."

"Right, we share the homeland between us - Salem controls the southern half and Kurt looks after the northern, based on the Gazera

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Province."

"He sounds like an obvious choice to take your place."

"You seem very anxious to find someone to take over my job. I wonder why you didn't choose him in the first place, it was your option."

"I didn't choose him because - because you were prettier - and I had designs upon you. On the other hand - I talked with him - and frankly, I didn't trust him."

"But you trust him enough to leave him where he is."

"I have you in Salem to keep him in line - on the other hand, he has quite a following in Gazera, or so I've been led to understand. To take him away might provoke a reaction. The reaction could be as mild as resentment, or as strong as open revolt!"

"Marcus said that he respected him."

"Marcus was a diplomat and probably had the same thoughts about our friend Kurt."

"I must admit, he said something strange when we were first introduced - that was after I came back here from Jerusalem. He said something to the effect that he was sure Marcus had mentioned his name, because they were like two flints who created sparks off each other."

"He sounds like a man who wants to do things his own way - and the sparks fly when someone puts on the brakes."

"I haven't found any reason to do so - but then, I've been concentrating on Ambrose's problems. Kurt Weber has been sniffing around for information though. He made a point of sounding me out after you were nominated to replace Marcus. He also made a point of arranging a holo-conference when I was appointed your deputy. Both occasions were nothing more than fishing expeditions."

"Friend Kurt sounds like a prime candidate for a closer scrutiny - and I don't mean to replace you as Deputy. Let's just say that he might have motive for murder - and he would have the opportunities his position provides."

"It sounds as if you think everyone is an assassin."

"I'll put it another way - there are very few who can be ruled out."

"Michael - is this witch hunt really necessary? Marcus is gone - even if you find his murderer, what will you do with him? I remember Marcus being faced with a murderer about two years ago. The man had killed someone in a fit of anger. Marcus agonised about what he should do for days - and nights as well. He couldn't sleep, there was no doubt that the man was guilty - but how should he be punished? In the end, the family of the murdered man took retribution into their own hands and killed the murderer.

Now, tell me, who gained out of it? Those who killed the murderer might have got the satisfaction of revenge, but they will have to stand before the Judgement Throne and answer for the taking of his life, just as the murderer will also have to stand there to answer for the original crime. Can any of us afford to be judges in this time? We know that we will be judged ourselves before long, how can we judge others?"

Michael leaned forward.

"I don't see it as judging and judgement. I see identifying the murderer a deterrent. I take your point, I can understand Marcus's dilemma. We no longer have a criminal justice system to handle this sort of thing. The Administrators are the custodians of what is left of the Peace of the Kingdom - and that is admittedly, very little. If I ignore the fact that Marcus was

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murdered, I am condoning the crime. The culprit must be identified. What we do with him after that takes place, is a different question.

Whoever murdered Marcus Steinbecker must be revealed. His judgement and punishment will not be in our hands. I promise you, I won't execute him - but I will strip him of any authority he has. He will not be allowed to profit from his wrongdoing. If necessary, I will confiscate whatever he possesses. I will treat him like Cain, who was cast out from the presence of his family and made to wander with every man's hand against him!"

Leah whispered.

"And who gives you the right to take such action, Michael ben Levi? Be careful that you don't have to answer that question before the Judgement Throne!"

Michael ground out his answer.

"I will leave him his life - but he will be forced to leave the society he has repudiated by the act of murder! I will not soil my hands with his blood. He will be free to join those who are setting their faces towards Gog! Would you prefer that I took his life? Do you want an act of revenge, Leah?"

### 10.

Grigor Suskov was not the first to meet the putative Gog face to face, but he was the first to return from the encounter relatively unscathed. Even in his self-imposed, conservative isolation, Suskov could no longer deny the events which were taking place around the Administration Centre on the Yenesei. Communications had been difficult for some time, but they had been maintained until the avalanche of refugees from the north had swept down on Alexei Kharkov's headquarters. From that moment, there had not been so much as an official whisper of what had happened, or what they could expect to occur next.

In his role as one of Alexei's 'governors', Grigor was not without resources. He was a man who made up his mind slowly, but when he finally did so, he emerged from the agony of indecision, quite clear about his course of action.

After some days of silence from the Yenesei, he sent out small teams of his best men to scout the ground on the other side of the Urals. They were given strict orders to keep a low profile and avoid provocation.

They make contact with the forerunners of the migrants much earlier than Grigor had anticipated. His own delay in forming a plan of action had provided them with the time to sweep westward towards the mountain barrier, crossing the broad expanse of reclaimed marshland which had been the granary of Western Siberia. It also showed the speed with which the migration was taking place.

Grigor was receiving constant enquiries from further to the west. The Barenkov brothers and their cousin Feodor Chernienko, were urging him to provide information. It was also an irritating fact that the Central Area Administrator, Michael ben Levi, was clamouring for enlightenment.

When his scouting parties returned, they all had the same thing to

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report. There was a steady stream of refugees flowing westward. The small communities which stood in their path were being swept aside and their storehouses emptied of supplies. This wasn't a disorganised rabble. A certain degree of discipline prevailed and there was cohesion in their movements.

One of the scouting parties reported something else. Gog had a policy when it came to dealing with communities. If they chose to offer resistance, they were quickly brushed aside as if they were no more than flies causing minor irritation and they were left with nothing except the smouldering ruins of what had once been their homes. On the other hand, if they voluntarily handed over the contents of their storehouses, they were dealt with fairly and their communities spared from destruction.

It was information to be digested calmly, a matter to be considered without haste, but by the time the advancing mass of people had crossed over into Grigor's stewardship, close to the eastern foothills of the Urals, he had made up his mind on a course dictated by prudence. He sent out fresh scouting groups to start negotiations with the advance guard of the migrants and now he awaited his first meeting with Gog.

The terms of the meeting had been precisely laid down by Gog's lieutenants. Suskov was careful to observe them to the letter. He knew his actions were being closely monitored by those who cared for adjacent stewardships. There was a great deal at stake for all of them. It wasn't only a matter of how he and his communities would be handled. The negotiations and subsequent agreement, would form the pattern for those who stood in the path of the relentless movement into Europe.

The Pod carrying Grigor Suskov and four of his closest advisers, had already been waiting at the venue for a half hour. The man they had assumed to be Gog was taking his time. Grigor was astute enough to recognise a powerplay. It was good political tactics to keep a nervous negotiator waiting. He was old enough, wise enough and patient enough not to allow his emotions to show. The delay gave him additional time to think, to wonder if he was really dealing with the mysterious Gog who had filled the thoughts and imaginations of men for nearly three thousand years. There was no reason to think otherwise. Every prophecy became an actuality at one time or the other and equally, the reality was not necessarily in accordance with what man had imagined it to be.

His pilot spoke softly.

"A Pod is approaching from the north-east."

His voice was tense and reflected the general atmosphere in the cabin. Undoubtedly, this was a significant moment, their future comfort would be dictated by the terms which were about to be dictated. Suskov was under no illusions, this was not a negotiation between equals, this would be a statement of requirements by their future overlord.

The Pod hovered above them, no doubt, those on board were reassuring themselves that it was not an ambush. When the pilot was satisfied, he landed close to their ship. Its outer doors opened but no one left the ship. There was a long delay. Suskov's pilot muttered quietly.

"You are expected to go there."

Grigor nodded and made his way to the open door of his ship. He stood framed in it for a moment, before descending to the uneven ground. He waited for his advisors to join him and then they began walking slowly in the direction of the other vessel. Someone appeared in its doorway - a reception

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committee of one. He gestured for them to follow him and disappeared inside once more.

Grigor Suskov was not surprised to see Georgi Malenski sitting at a table in the cabin. The 'governor' of one of Alexei's Arctic provinces stared at his fellow 'governor'. Suskov returned the gaze silently. Malenski nodded in acknowledgement.

"Greetings, Grigor Suskov - I wondered how long it would be before we met."

"Greetings, Georgi Malenski - I too wondered when I would meet Gog!" Malenski's eyebrows rose a fraction.

"That could be a dangerous assumption, brother Grigor. I do not claim to be the fabled Gog. I might even construe it as an insult to be called by that name. I put it to you that your scouts have found no evidence to suggest that I am leading a bloodthirsty horde which is about to sweep down on a people living in peace in unfenced cities.

On the contrary, the people who have placed themselves under my protection are farmers whose land has been frozen into permafrost. There are also artisans whose industries have been blown apart by the blizzards coming down from the pole. They are citizens displaced from their homes without hope of returning. They are women and children battling against cold, hunger and disease.

Search to your heart's content but you will not find an organised army with weapons of war. Our ploughshares have not been beaten into spears, nor have our sickles been converted to swords. You may choose to call me Gog, but I can't help what others want to call me."

"What have you done with Alexei Kharkov?"

Georgi eyed him steadily.

"What do you think I've done with him, Grigor? I have treated him as I have always treated him - with love and respect."

"Is it respectful to overrun his headquarters and sever communications?"

"Once again, my dear brother, you are making assumptions about my actions - and my motives. Where else would you expect me to take my displaced population? Alexei is too old and frail to journey around his Administration. I am faced with a major crisis. My people have to be fed. Millions have already died in the trek to the south, some from starvation and others from the effects of the climate change. Where else could I take them, excepting to Alexei, who is the father of us all?"

Grigor faced the other man's emotionless question. He wondered if Georgi really believed the words which were coming out of his own mouth. He ran his tongue across his lips, they felt suddenly dry.

"What did our father Alexei have to tell you, brother Georgi, when you arrived on his doorstep with your millions of followers?"

"Only what you would expect, my dear brother. He advised me to seek food where it was to be found. He ordered the storehouses along the Yenesei and to the south to be opened. He told me to disperse the people so that they had a chance to live normally. Our problem is, that as fast as I find new homes for the people, others join us and cry for food and shelter and so, we are constantly on the move to satisfy our needs."

"There must surely come a time when this movement must stop - "

"Only when there is no one else who is hungry or without shelter,

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brother Grigor!"

Grigor stared at him, the returned gaze was relentless. There could be no doubt that the trauma of the previous three years had disturbed him mentally.

"And now you move westward."

"That is correct, brother Grigor. We move to the west. The north is totally inhospitable, the south has impenetrable mountains - the east cannot provide the degree of relief that we need - my good friend, Ambrose Suosin, has problems of his own and I have no desire to encroach upon the Far East Administration, we must handle our own problems within the Heartland - and so, it must be to the west, away from the bleak Siberian plains, into the more gentle European country!"

Grigor cleared his throat.

"I am pleased to hear that you have no intentions of capitalising on the situation in East Asia."

Georgi remained watchful.

"Other than a mutual problem with the climate and refugees, I know of no other situation."

Grigor drew breath, he would have liked to leave him in ignorance but it was already too late.

"I thought you would have been made aware of the death of Marcus Steinbecker!"

Georgi didn't relax his gaze.

"I have been out of communication for some time. I'm sorry to hear of his death. I met him once, he impressed me with his wisdom."

"He died in a suborbiter accident on his way to attend the committal of Asher ben Jacobi."

Georgi nodded slowly.

"The death of Asher ben Jacobi is also news to me. So, we have lost two important Administrators within a very short period of time - it is a great loss."

"But one which suits your purposes, perhaps."

"I hope you are not being unwise enough to suggest that I am responsible in any way?"

Grigor's bravery evaporated rapidly.

"I am suggesting nothing, in any case, a new Administrator has been nominated to care for both areas."

"It is the prerogative of a Kingly-Priest to do so."

"I am sure we are both aware of that fact, brother Georgi. Alexei Kharkov remains our Administrator until a Firstling declares otherwise."

"I do not require to be reminded of that fact, brother Grigor."

In the face of the steady stare, Grigor changed the subject.

"You have mentioned your intention of moving westward across the Urals - what about those who have already settled in that country?"

Georgi eyed him without blinking.

"Surely, you do not suggest that some should live in settled comfort, whilst others starve? Do you want to see a repetition of similar conditions which were allowed to arise before the Great Destruction of one thousand years ago? In fact, it was a contributing factor to the three and a half years of the nuclear winter. Those who had nothing were starved and abused by those who had plenty. Surely, you are not suggesting a return to those

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conditions, brother Grigor? Such an attitude would mean that we have learned nothing during the thousand years of the Kingdom - and just as surely, such an attitude would produce once again a time of turmoil and destruction!"

Grigor cleared his throat once more.

"Those who have remembered what they have been taught, will agree that we must find room and food for all."

Georgi nodded slowly in approval.

"I thought you were a reasonable man, Grigor. That is the reason why I consented to talk to you. I am sure that we are capable of agreeing on the future like reasonable men and because you are a reasonable man, you will share what you have with us! We will follow the words of Scripture: 'Where a man has been given much, much will be expected of him; and the more a man has had entrusted to him the more he will be required to repay'.

"What do you demand of us, Georgi Malenski?"

Georgi leaned back in his chair.

"I can demand nothing, brother Grigor. Instead, I appeal to your compassion for a starving people. I am confident that you will make demands upon yourself - and what more or less could they be, than that you share what you have? You will be moved to show us a gesture of good will by opening your storehouses. In return, we will protect you from marauders who would seek to steal what you have! I will station a garrison at your headquarters for this purpose. We will protect you and ensure that there are none who would try to encourage unrest. We will punish those who are greedy and who think only of their own comfort.

In addition, because you are a prudent and reasonable man, I will value your contribution to the common good. I will make a place for you on my council of advisors. Our purpose will be to maintain discipline. We must avoid the excesses of a mindless mob. When you are under my protection, you will never need to fear! Now - I would like to hear if you have alternative suggestions."

Grigor glanced out of the corner of his eye at his silent advisers. They avoided the look and remained dumb. He knew he was defeated. There could be no suggestion of rejection or rebellion. It would be a pointless gesture to resist, knowing that to do so would mean being stripped of everything they possessed and perhaps, to lose their lives. To accept would mean an uneasy existence, but they could expect to hold on to something. On the other hand, there was no support visible from any ally strong enough to withstand the demands - no viable alternative offer. Grigor nodded.

"I have no alternative suggestions, brother Georgi. Your terms are generous."

Georgi nodded slowly and smiled.

"I am so happy to see your enthusiasm and wholehearted support, brother Grigor. Now, I suggest that you return to your headquarters and await our advance party. You will have much to prepare during the next three days!"

Georgi Malenski watched them troop back to their own ship. Grigor Suskov would require a degree of surveillance. His fellow 'governor' was not an imaginative man, but it was always possible that a spark of rebellion could be kindled - and if it was, the man who was being called Gog, would need to act quickly.

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Grigor and his party returned to their ship in silence. This was the way it would have to be in the future. Discussions would be conducted in whispers, for fear that they would be reported to Gog. There was no longer a doubt in Grigor's mind that Georgi Malenski was the man. It was knowledge calculated to render him impotent. They had been told repeatedly that no one could stand against Gog. He was an irresistible force leading a numberless Horde, who would sweep all before them.

The pilot lifted their Pod into the sky and at the same time, the other, which carried Gog, headed back at high speed towards the east. Grigor's pilot turned to the west and the broad, windswept plain was empty. It would not remain so for long, soon it would be crawling with the great movement of men, women and children seeking a new beginning. The tragedy was that no one should have denied them the right to do so, but like so many past generations, those who possessed the land would try to turn back the tide and would be swept aside by the momentum of its irresistible force.

If ever it was a time for decisive action it was then. Grigor Suskov was not a man capable of acting decisively. Events were moving too fast for him. When he returned to his headquarters on the deceptively calm western side of the Urals, he was confronted by an additional, unexpected problem - in the form of an uninvited visitor. Feodor Chernienko was waiting for him at the landing pad. Grigor slowly exited his Pod and was met with a cordial greeting.

"Greetings, brother Grigor. I am happy to see that you have returned safely."

Grigor nodded brusquely. He felt a surge of annoyance, the initiative was being wrestled from him by this upstart, jaunty Cossack who was young enough to be his son!

"Greetings, brother Feodor. I am most surprised to see you - of course, you are more than welcome!"

Feodor grinned amiably. Grigor was living up to his stuff-shirt reputation. He tried a little flattery.

"I wanted to assure you of my support in your dealings with Gog. You took the initiative to seek him out, the least the rest of us can do is stand with you!"

Grigor eyed him suspiciously.

"You seem very certain that I've met with Gog."

Feodor gestured casually.

"I am sure you are the best judge as to whether you have actually met the fabled leader from the far recesses of the north!"

Grigor proceeded with caution.

"I have met someone who lays no claim to the name."

"Isn't that to be expected? Gog is not yet perfectly positioned to assume overall control. He allows others to make the assumption."

By this time, they had entered Grigor's complex. The reluctant host led the way to his private office and gestured to a chair. Feodor maintained his smile and accepted.

"I hope you have some news of our dear Father Alexei. We've experienced some difficulties with communications over the last few days."

The answer was slow in coming.

"I have been assured that he is safe and well."

"That is very good to hear - I look forward to being able to visit him soon - as I am sure you are!"

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Grigor gazed into Feodor's disarming smile.

"I had no plans to visit Father Alexei - the current situation demands my attention here."

"Ah, yes! The current situation. Tell me, brother Grigor, when can we expect Gog and his Horde to appear on this side of the Urals?"

The question came with the speed of a rapier. It left Grigor groping for an appropriate answer.

"I can't answer for the leader I have just met."

Feodor eyed him steadily, his smile had faded a little.

"You persist in avoiding to call him by name. I wonder why? I am quite sure I am not mistaken. There should be no doubt in your mind that you have just met Gog."

"He made the point that it is others who choose to call him by that name. I still call him brother Georgi Malenski."

Feodor nodded slowly.

"That is your option, brother Grigor. No doubt, he presented you with a choice which is not a choice. You were given no option other than to accept his terms. Either you will cooperate with him and accommodate his demands, or he will sweep you aside as he has done others and confiscate all you have."

Grigor stared at the young man.

"You appear to be very well informed and provide the answers to your own questions, brother Feodor."

The younger man stood and walked to the closed window. Outside, the terrain looked bleak and cold.

"I hope you realise, brother Grigor, that there has to come a time when someone stands up to him. Everyone who surrenders now, only postpones the inevitable conflict. In the name of heaven, man! You may be quite certain that we are dealing with Gog! We are confronting the leader of the host who will prove whether we stand with God or whether we surrender to the influence of Satan!"

"Brave words! Brave words indeed, brother Feodor - but tell me how I can resist millions who are poised to enter my stewardship? You spoke of options - alternatives which are neither. They will either come and consume what we have like an uncontrollable fire, or they will pass through and leave something for us. I think I should remind you of something else, young man. To the north, my stewardship is threatened by a similar danger.

Coming down from the Russian Arctic, from Scandia and the reclaimed lands, is another hungry mob. I have no resources to confront them. I have been told by my scouting parties that they are totally pitiless. On the other hand, Georgi Malenski has control over his millions. Perhaps, it is a case of the devil you know being better than the devil you don't know!"

Feodor stared at him.

"I would rather trust in the God I know than any devil, whether I know him or not!"

Grigor stood abruptly.

"Then, that is where we differ, Feodor Chernienko. Perhaps, you will sing a different tune when you are confronted with an irresistible force on your doorstep!"

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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

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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

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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 unwallled 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

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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

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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, the

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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

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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.

## 12.

Elena Malenski felt her tension ease, when the Pod piloted by her husband was sighted returning from the west. Earlier, Georgi had been uncommunicative when she had attempted to probe the reasons for his solo flight. Being uncommunicative was becoming the pattern between them. She trod carefully, acknowledging the almost intolerable tension under which her husband laboured. She knew she should not appear too anxious. Her instinct was to wait for him at the fabric door of their tent. In earlier times, it was something she would have done as a matter of course - and it had been something he would have enjoyed - a subject for teasing.

In these days, even that innocent expression of her love had to be curtailed. She was expected to show a serene face to the thousands of desperate people who surrounded them. She had to show that she had the utmost confidence in Georgi's invincibility. To wait anxiously in the entrance to their tent, might have portrayed uncertainty, apprehension and her own secret lack of trust in their leader.

For the same reason, she had to restrain their son. Their child would have liked to run to his father. In former times, it would have been natural and Georgi would have swung him up into the air and they would have laughed and shouted and then, they would have come to her together.

Now, it was different. The changing climate had seen to that. The successive failure of their crops along the Arctic shores, had contributed. The sheets of ice which covered the sea lanes which had once been an arterial route between the west and the east, had added their influence. Instead of the balmy conditions of the Kingdom of Peace, they were confronted with an

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ice desert across which the freezing winds from the pole blew in a persistent blizzard.

She had watched her husband crushed down from his natural exuberance to a bitter, determined - fanatical man, whose very nature had been frozen like the ground beneath their feet. She had seen his futile attempts to keep the population supplied with food from the storehouses and had watched his despair as every resource dried up. Eventually, they were faced with the inevitable decision to abandon all for which they had laboured over the centuries and to strike west and south into the centre of Siberia. It had been a forlorn, last hope that there would be something left to feed the desperate millions.

Piotr moved restlessly within her restraining arms. He was tall and handsome, like his father. Dark and restless, the very qualities which had attracted her to Georgi in the first place. He was just seven years old, but already some of the carefree innocence had gone, along with their security and comfort. Personally, she didn't resent the hard existence. She saw the sense of Georgi's argument that the leader could not be seen to live in comfort whilst his followers lived in privation. It was one of the characteristics which bound his followers to him. Elena accepted the primitive conditions, and the constant movement to the west - searching for an elusive something. She was sorry for the boy, but then, she was sorry for all those other mothers whose children had died in the relentless cold and in hunger.

She looked up as the tent door was moved aside. Georgi stooped to enter and then allowed the flap to drop back behind him. She released Piotr to go to his father. Georgi looked down at the boy and hugged him silently. The earlier exuberance of greeting was missing, it had been lost somewhere back along the thousands of kilometres they had already travelled. She joined them and kissed her husband silently on the cheek.

"I'm glad you made it back before dark."

"The fires would have guided me."

"It concerns me when you go alone, Georgi."

"Nothing can happen to me - I will fulfil my destiny."

She bit her tongue and didn't answer. He was beginning to believe what others were whispering about him. He had a destiny, he had no option but to do what he was doing. No one dared to say it to his face, but she had heard the whispers - he was Gog! It was something she repudiated! Georgi Malenski - the Georgi Malenski she had learned to love, whom she had married, and to whom she had given a son - was not Gog! Nothing would ever convince her otherwise! But - increasingly, it sounded as if Georgi believed the groundswell murmur himself.

"Do you know, Elena - Grigor Suskov called me Gog to my face! He wasn't even subtle about it. By extension, this poor, starving mob of displaced humanity camped around us, is my Horde! Can you think of nothing more laughable? Most of them are so weak, one breath of wind would blow them over. I nearly exploded in the face of his arrogance. Grigor brought four of his advisors with him - they didn't say a word from beginning to end, they just sat and looked at me as if I was the devil himself! He had a pilot back in his ship as well."

"And, you were alone, Georgi! They could have done anything to you!"

"You forget, Elena - as far as they are concerned, I am Gog! No one can do anything to me! I used their fear - I turned their stupidity to my own

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use. I told them that I was coming over the mountains into Europe and that in three days, I expected their storehouses to be opened for us - Grigor surrendered without a fight!"

"Be careful, Georgi - If you call yourself Gog, they will treat you as Gog."

"You worry too much, my darling, Elena!"

It was the first time he had used such an endearment in a very long time. She looked at him quickly. He was spooning the thin soup she had placed before him. She continued to watch him in silence. He was so thin, his face gaunt with strain. He looked much older than his three hundred and five years. He looked up suddenly and caught her staring at him.

"Marcus Steinbecker is dead - Grigor Suskov told me."

"I didn't know him -"

"The Administrator of the Far East - Ambrose Suosin's superior. I met him six years ago - he was a good man - we talked together for a while - I liked him. Asher ben Jacobi is dead as well. It would be interesting to know who replaced them."

"Perhaps, they weren't replaced - Couldn't Grigor Suskov tell you?"

"They would have been replaced by someone - Grigor suddenly looked as if he wished he hadn't opened his mouth. I didn't press the point. I suppose he wanted to keep Gog in the dark!"

"You shouldn't joke about being called Gog, Georgi."

"Joke! What makes you think I am joking? Tell me, Elena, does the thought of being married to the monster, Gog, fill you with horror? Will it be so terrible to be known as the wife of Gog?"

She sat on the rough bench beside him and put her arm around his shoulders. She waited for a rebuff, but it wasn't forthcoming. She rested her head on his shoulder and felt the tension in him. He felt like a spring waiting to snap. Almost reluctantly, he put his head down to rest on hers. She whispered.

"The only way I want to be known, is as the wife of Georgi Malenski. I have never wanted anything else. I want people to know me as the mother of his son. That's the extent of my ambition."

She felt a momentary return of tension.

"I have no ambitions to be Gog, Elena. I told Grigor Suskov that I couldn't help what others called me - I have no control over what anyone says or thinks. But I'll tell you what I told him. I won't rest until the last of our people has a place to live and enough to eat. If that makes me Gog, then so be it! I not ignorant of the Scriptures; Ezekiel says, 'I will turn you about, I will put hooks in your jaws. I will lead you out, you and your whole army'. It sounds as if the man who is to be Gog, has no choice!"

Piotr had fallen asleep against them. Georgi picked him up and laid him in his nest of bedding. He stared down at the sleeping boy for a moment and then turned to look at his wife. It was an unspoken invitation and one which had not been forthcoming for so many months. She blew out the guttering, smoky flame and took his hand in the darkness.

The whole camp stirred with the coming of daylight. Georgi rose with the first light, easing himself away from the sleeping form of his wife. He looked down at her for a moment and then across to his sleeping son. They had had so many plans, but they were now no more than shattered memories, broken like the blizzard-shattered home they had abandoned on

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the Arctic shore. The future lay to the west, over the distant mountain range he had glimpsed during his flight to meet with Grigor Suskov.

The Urals were a low mountain range, unlike those which formed such an effective barrier to the south of Alexei Kharkov's Administration. The Urals might have been low physically, but they formed a high psychological barrier. Beyond them, the European plain stretched to the Atlantic - and to the south, the rich lands along the Great Sea would provide plentifully for his starving people. It was their Promised Land, the goal which was in the mind's eye of the people who followed him in unconditional trust. Today, they would move another day's march nearer and in two more days after that, they would cross into Europe.

He opened the tent flap and looked out into the bleak, monotony of the drained marsh upon which they had established their camp. It had not been the best position, the water table was rising again and the surface was a slimy morass. The days when this area had been a sea of golden wheat, were no more than a dream - but yet, that was the way it had been until three years earlier. He marvelled again, how quickly the benefits of the Kingdom were being swallowed up as if it had never existed.

Some of his immediate neighbours hailed him. The breath came from their nostrils like steam. They stamped around in the mud, trying to keep warm. All around him, the tents were coming down. This stopping place had been a temporary respite, they never remained more than a day or two in any one place. This had been a little different, they had remained there for three days - but they had had a reason, the contact which had been made with the scouts sent out by Grigor Suskov. Georgi had moved cautiously, not knowing what waited for them on the other side of the mountains. Now, he knew - a compliant Grigor Suskov awaited them. They could move forward with renewed confidence.

Some of the men were moving towards him. They were his closest advisors. They were filthy with yellow mud, but looked cheerful enough. He thought back of the smartly dressed men who had visited him in his headquarters on the delta of the Lena. Once again, the illusion of fantasy threatened to overwhelm him. It was an effort of will to accept that those days had once existed. One thing had not changed, they stood waiting in a semicircle around him, as they had done so often in the past - and for the same reason - they were waiting for a briefing on his meeting of the previous day. He stared at them in silence for a moment.

"I met with Grigor Suskov yesterday. I told him that we will cross the mountains in three days. He will open his storehouses for us."

There was a hoot of approbation, which quickly subsided.

"There's something else - He believes the same story that you have been whispering amongst yourselves. He believes that I am Gog - I tell you now - I deny it! I want you to jump on anyone you find spreading such talk. - There's something else, he told me that his northern boundary is being threatened by an undisciplined mob coming down from Scandia. They are foraging and pillaging everything they can lay their hands on. We had better be ready for them."

They looked at him solemnly, then one said.

"How? How shall we be ready for them, Georgi?"

He responded slowly.

"We must be ready to defend ourselves, our women and our children,

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and use any means to do so."

"Including weapons?"

The answer was even slower in coming.

"Including weapons!"

The column of refugees were soon on the move again. Ahead, lay the southern extremity of the Urals. When finally they had been driven out of their Arctic home, seeking to escape from the encroaching ice, their direction had been to the south. The massif of the Putorana Plateau had confronted them, and this they had skirted. Thereafter, they had followed the Yenesei due south to Alexei Kharkov's headquarters. From that point, their direction had been to the west. Along every kilometre of the way, they had been joined by a steady stream of struggling humanity.

When they had reached Alexei Kharkov, he could do nothing for them. His immediate storehouses had already been opened and exhausted. His advice had been to scatter the people and allow them to farm whatever land they chose. It had been a course of action easier said than done. The infrastructure of Alexei's Administration was shattered. In the following days many other communities, who had moved southward from the inhospitable northern regions, had merged with the larger group.

There had been a steady flow of departures as well, they were those who had opted to face the southern Siberian climate and try to scratch a living. Some were too old and or weak to do otherwise, others had no stomach for more seemingly endless trekking. These subtractions were more than compensated by a steady flow of incomers from the northern regions. Georgi couldn't be sure how many he was leading across the mountains into Europe, perhaps he would never know.

The column stretched back across the sodden ground as far as he could see. It was a column at least ten kilometres wide and in places, it bulged out to a width approaching twenty kilometres. They ought to have been a disorganised rabble, plundering and ravaging whatever they could find - but they were not and the reason why they were not was, that they believed they were led by Gog!

He walked as did the rest of them, with their tent and bedding strapped across his shoulders. Attached to this were the few pitiful possessions they had salvaged - a cooking pot, a few eating utensils. He claimed no privileges for himself or for his family. There were several Pods which had been provided by Alexei. Each was laden to overflowing with heavier items for the benefit of all. They were so laden, they were almost unmanageable. The pilots fought them every inch of the way and no one accused them a second time, of having an easy ride.

Some of his lieutenants had organised scouting parties. In the main, their task was to find the most appropriate way for such a large group. They were on the watch for anything. It had been they who had sighted the cautious spies Grigor had sent out - and it had been they who had surrounded one such group and had led them back to the main group.

Georgi smiled grimly when he recalled the incident. He had never seen such fear on the faces of any men when he confronted them. The smile drained away from his face. They had looked as if they had been confronted with the devil himself! It had served his purpose to let them think so. He had dealt with them courteously and even given them food which he couldn't afford. Then he had sent them back to their master. The outcome had been

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the meeting with Grigor.

Elena plodded at his side, between them, Piotr maintained the place. She looked down at her son. He had grown used to walking and whereas earlier, he had sometimes pleaded to be carried, of late, he was determinedly independent. She looked at Georgi and watched the various expressions flicker across his face. Even when they walked so close together, they were apart. His mind was always on other things. She hugged the memory of their loving during the previous night to herself. That precious memory might be all that she would have in the coming days. Her sense of foreboding increased. When they crossed into Europe, it would be the signal for a change.

The sky was clear that night and the air much colder. The moon was harshly defined. The fires were hardly enough to keep out the cold and drew families to them, huddled together against the persistent wind which found its way through the thickest clothing. For the most part, however, the clothing was thin and mudcaked from the wet earth. The camp was silent, almost brooding. With so many people gathered in so small an area, there ought to have been the sound of conversation - perhaps, even of singing. Georgi watched the faces of his lieutenants, they looked uncomfortable - almost evasive.

"What do you have to tell me. Is there something so hard to say?"

It was a challenge which produced a restless movement but nothing else. Georgi looked directly at one of them.

"Come on, Ruri - You've always had something to complain about!"

It might have produced a chuckle on other occasions, but not that night. Ruri looked up and held his gaze steadily.

"Very well, Georgi - it's something you ought to know."

"What ought I to know?"

"You told us to organise our defences - in the event we should meet some of the scavengers from Scandia."

Elena looked sharply at her husband. Georgi nodded.

"I did."

"You told us to - think about weapons."

Georgi nodded.

"Go on."

Ruri moistened his lips.

"Some of them have weapons already - and they've used them!"

There was a long silence.

"How have they been used?"

"They've been used against those who stood in the way. Even against those who co-operated and opened the storehouses."

Georgi stared into the fire.

"What else?"

"They have been used within our group to get extra rations!"

The rest of his lieutenants muttered between themselves. He waited for the surge of anger to die down.

"I suppose you can identify these men?"

"I can identify the ones I know about. My guess is that there are plenty more with weapons, but they're not advertising the fact."

One of his other advisers interjected.

"You have to do something about them, Georgi."

"What do you suggest? - Hold a trial and cut off their hands!"

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They stared at him, no one answered.

"Do you think I should take steps to punish them?"

The same man responded.

"They've attacked our own people - You've always emphasised discipline - you can't allow that!"

"Tell me the difference between attacking those who have put themselves directly under our care and those who have agreed to open their storehouses on the understanding that they will receive our protection."

There was no answer.

"Go and find some of the ones you know."

Ruri got to his feet and disappeared into the darkness. It was some time before he returned with a group of seven men. They openly carried knives in their belts. The firelight flickered on the naked blades. Their leader returned Georgi's gaze with a hint of defiance.

"Greetings, Georgi Malenski."

"Greetings - what are you called?"

"The call me Pik Sedova."

Georgi smiled slightly. The man was built like a mountain - it wasn't his real name, of course.

"I suppose you came across the ice from Novaja Zemla?"

He was rewarded with a grudging nod.

"You're a sharp man."

"So are your weapons."

"Yes, they're sharp - and we've learned to use them!"

Once again, there was a challenge.

"So - you weren't driven out only by the blizzards?"

The man grunted.

"On Novaja Zemla there are always blizzards. You are right, if we can cross the ice, so could others. We had to fight for our lives."

"And now, you take what you want when you want it."

The man spat into the fire.

"If someone tries to take from my family, he deserves to be skewered!"

Georgi nodded.

"In three days, we will be across the mountains. We will soon meet others coming down from the north. They will also be interested in what we have. We must be ready to defend ourselves. I want you to find all the others who have weapons. I want you to make more and I want you to train our active men in their use - and mark this, Pik Sedova - I want no more fighting in the camp. If there is - I will hold you personally responsible - understood?"

Pik Sedova stared hard into the eyes of the seated man. He spat into the fire again and nodded before turning away and leading his silent group back into the darkness. Elena looked at her husband, he was staring into the firelight. One after the other, his advisers stood and went away, leaving them and their sleeping son alone.

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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

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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 unwallled 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

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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!"

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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

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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.

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"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."

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"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?"

### 14.

There was an unspoken option to return to the comparative comfort of Grigor's dasha. It wasn't total perversity which made Michael decide to spend the night with Georgi Malenski and his family. It was, perhaps, pushing hospitality to the limit, but there was no argument when it came to finding a few scraps of cloth to act as blankets for the guests. Their bed was the ground and the sleeping arrangements were communal. It was an uncomfortable night and sleeping was fitful. On those occasions when Michael awoke, he had the impression that Georgi Malenski was laying awake and watchful. He wondered if this potential Gog ever slept and if he did or he didn't, where he found the reserves of energy to sustain the long marches through the wilderness.

They rose early, stiff and cold, their clothes damp with the mist which rose with the coming of the dawn. Georgi had already left the tent and Elena was monosyllabic with her responses. Piotr eyed them solemnly and no amount of overtures of friendship could produce a response other than a slight smile which quickly faded.

Michael and Feodor escaped from the tent. The young Cossack asked bluntly.

"Tell me, brother Michael, did your grand plan produce the desired result?"

"Grand plan?"

"Yes - whatever you had in mind which was worth nearly freezing to death and leaving us with a legacy of rheumatism!"

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"If you had frozen to death, the rheumatism wouldn't become a factor to worry about. I thought you Cossacks were supposed to enjoy living rough, and riding wild and free across the steppes!"

"Only those of us who are mentally disturbed!"

"You disappoint me, Feodor - where's your romantic streak?"

"If I had to hazard a guess, frozen solid with my bone marrow!"

"Cheer up! It was all for a good cause."

"I hope you'll explain that to me, when I'm able to think straight."

Their host approached from between the lines of the tents. He nodded a greeting.

"The arrangements for latrines are similar to those adopted by the Israelites when they crossed the wilderness - you will find them outside of the camp!"

It was good to know. Georgi went on.

"The Lord God imposed obligatory rules of sanitation in those days. He had no wish to lose His chosen people through disease - He had a purpose for them. I sometimes wonder if He has a purpose for us."

Michael tried to sound noncommittal.

"Only time will tell."

"Ezekiel tells us that He will lead Gog and his Horde out of the far north, so that they will come upon a peaceful people and there meet their end. Ask yourselves this question as you return to your comforts. Would it be better for me to take no precautions and encourage disease to annihilate us here in our wanderings, rather than to wait for our burial in the Valley of Gog's Horde?"

Michael stared into the haggard face.

"I will ask myself your question, brother Georgi - if you will ask yourself one in return. Why are you so hell bent on identifying yourself as Gog and calling your followers his Horde? There are always alternatives!"

"When it came down to the line, brother Michael - did Judas have any option other than to be the Betrayer?"

"I honestly think he did, brother Georgi. He had other options, he could have been as faithful as the other apostles. It was his choice - he was called to be a blessing, but he elected to follow the alternative path. I will tell you this, brother Georgi. I will never call you Gog - until you start to act like Gog!"

It was soon time for farewells. Elena and her son took their hands and listened to the words of thanks for hospitality. She watched them as they walked between the tent lines, following her husband. There was so much she would have liked to have responded, but it was her place to remain silent. Michael ben Levi had not been what she had expected. He was not the arch-enemy of her husband, rather, he had seemed almost friendly, at the very least, compassionate. The same could have been said for his companion. More than ever, as she watched them leave, she felt the utter weariness which springs from disillusionment. She was almost tempted to run after them with her son - but it was not her place to run - to escape - her place was to remain with Georgi and to be with him until the end.

The visitors parted company with Malenski at the edge of the encampment. Grigor's dasha was a few hundred metres further. Michael was conscious of the cultural contrast between the two. On the one hand, the abject poverty of the refugees and their mounting frustration and desperation - on the other, the quiet comfort of the ancient homestead which had housed

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Grigor and his ancestors through the peaceful existence of the Kingdom of Peace.

Georgi interrupted his thoughts.

"I will remember our meeting, brother Michael. I will remember that you chose to come to us to share our poverty. I will remember your words, but I think we cannot turn away the fate which awaits both of us. You and I are destined to meet again - if it shall be on the Plain of Esdraelon, then, the outcome is foreordained."

"It is only foreordained, brother Georgi - if you are, or if you allow yourself to become - Gog!"

"Go in peace, Michael ben Levi - and you too, Feodor Chernienko."

"Go in peace, Georgi Malenski."

They watched him stride back into the lines of tents and disappear.

"Now, will you be good enough to tell me what we gained by that meeting."

"Nothing tangible perhaps - excepting your rheumatism! Georgi Malenski is now more than a name and we know the relentless pressures he is under. If he becomes Gog, we shall know the reason why. I agree with you, we haven't prevented the movement of his people into Europe, but I think we might have altered the direction of their thrust. Georgi will remember our meeting and lead his people into the northern plains - and I suspect, become entangled with opposing groups moving down from Scandia.

I doubt whether they will appear at the borders of your stewardship - at least, in the short term. I believe that we have bought ourselves time. Eventually, they will move south, I suppose that it is inevitable - Gog must become Prince of Rosh and of Meshech and of Tubal and form his alliances with Persia and Egypt and Libya and with Beth Togarmah and Gomer."

"And then, they will move against Jerusalem!"

"Yes - Georgi was correct in that. The time will come when Gog and his Horde will come into the Plain of Esdraelon and menace Jerusalem!"

"And there, you will fight them, Michael!"

"God will fight our battle Feodor. I will stand up for my people long before that moment! I am already standing up for my people - what do you think our sleeping on the frozen ground was all about? What do you think our conversations with Georgi Malenski were about? It was Michael standing up for his people - buying time, allowing the prophecies of the Lord to come to fruition!"

They had reached the entrance of the dasha. Grigor Suskov stood waiting.

"I was concerned - "

"About our safety, brother Grigor. Georgi was an exemplary host - and we were offered a comfortable bed - one which was as comfortable as his own!"

Feodor winced at the memory. Grigor continued.

"What can you tell me about his intentions - as far as we are concerned, I mean? Will he strip us of all we have?"

"He will expect you to share what you have as you did during the time of the Kingdom."

Grigor swallowed.

"Then, we shall be left with nothing!"

"Malenski remembers the rules which governed us for a thousand

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years - we shall all profit from God's benevolence. Even though we may not have ploughed and sown, wasn't it always the case that all shared the harvest?"

"Who will feed US when everything has been taken?"

"You will plough and sow again and God will give you the harvest - which you will share with your guests."

"Guests!"

The response was explosive. Feodor stared at their disgruntled host.

"It was your choice to allow him and his people to cross the Urals."

Michael corrected him.

"It was no one's choice - it was the will of God. There was nothing which could be done to prevent it!"

They made their escape from the increasingly gloomy atmosphere of Grigor's household. On their return journey to the south-west, Michael listened in silence to Feodor's wild schemes on how he would combat the influx of refugees if they should dare to encroach upon his territory. He couldn't be stirred by the battle cries. The meeting with Georgi Malenski had left a profound impression in his soul. He tried to analyse it and in the end it came down to one fact - he couldn't hate this man who seemed destined to become Gog despite himself. He knew that in other circumstances, he would have been closer to him than to a brother.

He delayed his return to Jerusalem and stayed a further night with Feodor. There was no pressing reason why he should, but he liked his new ally and there was no telling when they would have the opportunity to meet again. Almost inevitably, the conversation turned to the subject of Marcus and his visit with Alexei and Leah.

"I must say that I wasn't surprised when I heard that they had married."

Michael eyed his host, whose expression was carefully innocent.

"I knew that Marcus had the intention of pursuing the matter."

"It was obvious when they were here - he couldn't keep his eyes off her."

"You have a romantic soul, Feodor - I'm surprised that you haven't a lady in your life - to act as your hostess."

Feodor snorted.

"There are plenty who thought they qualified!"

"But you have outmanoeuvred them all! No one has ever succeeded in putting the marital bit in your mouth!"

Feodor leaned back in his chair and grinned.

"The same can be said for you, brother Michael - you are fancy free - or was Georgi Malenski blowing hot air last evening?"

"Some are even better qualified to spread rumours, than they are to be your wife, brother Feodor!"

"There's no smoke without fire."

"Sometimes, there can be a lot of smoke but only from a little flame."

"The flame can always be fanned into a blaze!"

"Not when there's twenty thousand kilometres between the wind and the embers."

Feodor shook his head in disbelief.

"I can see that you're in desperate need of someone to organise your love life."

"I wouldn't waste the energy - it's a lost cause!"

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Feodor looked up at the ceiling and murmured.

"I thought Administrators were all powerful. If I was in your shoes, I wouldn't allow twenty thousand kilometres to get in the way of the woman I loved. I'd transfer her to Jerusalem and tell her that she was indispensable - I wouldn't stand any arguments!"

Michael hooted with laughter.

"This conversation confirms one thing, Feodor. You don't know Leah Steinbecker very well, otherwise you would know that it isn't possible to stampede her to do something she's made up her mind to oppose."

"And I tell you this, Michael - If you want her, you can't afford to be fainthearted, you have to show your determination and use any tactic to clear the obstacles!"

Michael laughed again, this time it was a little forced.

"I'm sure you're right, Feodor - I'll think about it."

Michael didn't sleep well that night, although it should have been a foregone conclusion that he would do so. His bed was soft and his room ostentatiously comfortable. It was a dramatic contrast to the conditions he had experienced only twenty-four hours earlier. He lay awake and stared at the flickering fire shadows on the ceiling and thought of Georgi, Elena and Piotr huddled together on the frozen ground, with their stomachs half-filled with a thin gruel which would have been their only nourishment. He wondered how he could make his advisers and his allies understand the abject privation of those people, or how he could persuade them that Gog HAD to emerge from out of such misery. Whoever was to become Gog, already had the hooks of hunger and privation in his jaws and he was being led to his destiny.

He was determined to leave early on the following day. As he dressed, he watched Feodor and his men exercising their horses on the wild ground outside of the cultivated gardens around the dasha. He had politely declined the invitation to ride with them. He sensed that Feodor was disappointed, but he knew he was no match for these wild Cossack horsemen. Feodor's concept of Michael who 'would stand up for his people' probably hinged around the vision of a heroic character on a prancing charger. Michael had no desire to leave his new ally with a dented image.

By the time he was ready to leave for Jerusalem, Feodor had returned. He was glowing with exertion and bubbling with energy and enthusiasm. It subsided a little when he realised that his guest was waiting to leave. At the base of the ramp leading up into his Shuttle, Feodor impulsively grasped him in a bear hug and kissed him enthusiastically.

"Of one thing you can be sure, Michael ben Levi. I will be more than a match for Gog and his marauders if he decides to come marching in my direction and I know you will back me all the way! Gog might want to become Prince of Rosh, Meshech and Tubal, but he will have to do so over my dead body!"

Michael felt a tingle in his spine. Feodor, in his flamboyance, had probably stated a simple truth. There would be many dead bodies on the way to the final meeting in the place called Armageddon. It was a sobering thought which accompanied him on his solitary journey back to Jerusalem. He was alone in the Shuttle, but he was able to leave the piloting to the onboard computer. He set the destination co-ordinates and sat back. There was no other traffic close to him. He had the sky and the land below to himself. His direction was almost due south over the lowlands between the

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Dneiper and the drained Azov basin. To his right side he could see the sheen of water which was the wide channel of the Dneiper where it emptied into the canal system between the polders which had been reclaimed from the Black Sea.

So much of the region's geography had been changed during the thousand years when man had put his weapons of war to rest and had concentrated on the activities of peace. He knew the changes were not a local phenomenon, it was the same everywhere. Man had toiled under the benevolence of the Kingdom and the guidance of the Kingly-Priests to create an environment where all could share in the prosperity. His comments to Grigor had not been designed to provoke anger. Man HAD shared his harvest with all who had a need. There had never been any question of withholding the providence of God from another man. Georgi Malenski was only reaffirming the old standards, when he demanded that the storehouses should be opened to feed his starving people.

The major problem to be solved was that the resources of the storehouses were not infinite, there would soon come a time when they would be exhausted. There was another problem, he suspected that not all of the Administrators shared his view. Some were determined to hoard their reserves of food to feed the people of their own regions. It was a policy which had to create two classes - the haves and the have nots - and it would lead to division and strife. Michael was almost certain that Micah Perga was one of those who did not favour sharing his resources. Nothing had ever been declared openly - that wasn't Micah Perga's way, but neither had there been any commitment from him to do so.

By this time, the Shuttle had already crossed the old coastline of the southern Ukraine and the neat lines of the Azov polders were below. Canals led off the flood of waters from the Don and discharged them into the deep basin of what was left of the ancient Euxine. The croplands were lush but he knew that the twelvefold harvests they had once produced, were now a thing of the past. The climate was changing globally. It wasn't only the Arctic regions which had become inhospitable, but also - and even more worrying - the deserts were beginning to reclaim the wheatlands and turn them once again, into the sandy wastes they had once been before the establishment of the Kingdom.

The net result was an accelerated decline in harvest yields - but the number of mouths requiring to be fed did not diminish. On the contrary, the rate of population growth had increased dramatically during the previous three years.

He had crossed out over the edge of the polders on to the deep lake which was the residue of the Black Sea. The coastline of Anatolia lay ahead and the massif of its plateau was a dark smudge on the horizon. It was the last barrier before the Land of the Covenant, the Holy Land of old, the place where the final battle of human history would be fought and won - and thereafter would come the End and the opening of the books.

He shuddered despite himself and suddenly wished that he wasn't alone in a Shuttle winging across the deep waters of the ancient sea. A little exuberant, human company would have been better than his dark thoughts. He smiled when he thought of Feodor - he would have been the ideal companion. He realised how much his opinion of his new ally had changed. Feodor Chernienko had been the sort of man dismissed as a playboy by the

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bureaucratic advisors who had surrounded Asher and whom he had now inherited.

Even Marcus Steinbecker had formed the opinion that Feodor was a lightweight who liked his pleasures and could not be trusted to take the directives of the Covenant seriously. There was no doubt that Feodor had his idiosyncrasies, but Michael had come to the conclusion that he was a good man to have at his back, when it came to a fight - and it would come to a fight!

Michael felt his stomach muscles tighten once again and he couldn't get the haunted face of Georgi Malenski out of his mind. Was he Gog? He couldn't give himself an answer with any certainty. He wished he knew, but the visit to the encampment, had not provided conclusive evidence.

The shuttle had crossed the coast and was rising to clear the mountainous plateau of Anatolia. The land of Tubal was directly below and to the left of it, Meshech. Beyond that coastal strip was the land they had called Urartu Ararat and way to his left, the high peak of the mountain of Noah broke the skyline.

It had all begun there after the flood. He could almost visualise Japeth and his sons descending into the ravines of the plateau and heading to the west into the land where Gomer settled and raised his sons and they in turn would have left their tribal encampment to form their own communities. Togarmah heading south towards the ancient Lake Van. Beyond Togarmah lay Assyria and beyond that, Babylon, Sumer and Chaldea - but Michael's course didn't lead in that direction. His way led over Aram into Canaan - and Jerusalem.

The shuttle began to lose height and start the descent to the Salt Sea terminal. He knew his advisors would be clucking their disapproval like old hens. Since the death of Marcus Steinbecker, there had been a cloying determination to surround each Administrator with a cordon of protectors, lest another should fall victim to an assassin. Michael's visit to Georgi Malenski had not been announced, he had allowed an impetuous Feodor to sweep him along with his enthusiasm and they had swept aside protocol when they had decided to embark on the risky venture without even a pilot, let alone the cordon of security personnel the advisors would have insisted upon.

Michael grinned, he felt like a schoolboy who had played truant. He was absolutely certain that Asher would never have done such a thing - and when it came down to it, he doubted if there were many other Administrators who would have acted so incautiously - Joshua Aristides included. He felt rather pleased with himself!

The Shuttle touched down under computer control and eased into a parking bay. He took his time to assemble the limited amount of baggage he had taken with him. He squared his shoulders and took a firm grip on the handle of his holdall and touched the control of the outer door. He marched confidently into the reception area and was confronted with a phalanx of sober faced men, who stared at him anxiously. His personal assistant stepped forward. Michael nodded a greeting.

"Peace, Simon! Peace - all of you who have so kindly come to meet !"

It sounded like a challenge.

"Peace, Michael - We have been waiting for you anxiously."

"Surely! You were not worried about me?"

"It is Leah, Michael - she is missing!"

Within three hours, Michael had arrived in Salem. On the way, he was fed details of what had happened.

Leah Steinbecker had last been seen three days earlier. She had left Salem, piloting a Shuttle and she had been unaccompanied. Her staff had not been informed of her plans. It had been the evening of the day following her departure before someone had the first indication that something was not as it should have been.

Michael reflected grimly, no matter what her destination might have been, there should have been an automatic record of her progress at Salem Control. He read further:

Well into the evening, her Pod was supposedly still in flight over the desolate Barrier Ranges which separated the Home Provinces from Mongolia. The Pod had continued its course throughout the night, maintaining a steady speed and direction which apparently led to nowhere. She did not respond to attempts at communication. By morning, there was sufficient apprehension for someone to make a special report to his supervisor. In turn, enquiries were made to the Administration Secretariat and finally, steps were taken to find out what was happening.

The muscles on Michael's jaw had knotted when he had finished reading the report. Fully twenty hours had passed before somebody had decided that the mysterious flight of their Deputy Administrator should be investigated. He promised himself that this somebody's head would roll when he reached Salem. It wasn't his first priority. He was sick with apprehension about what had happened to her. His latest reports from Tracking Control confirmed that the Pod was still in the air.

Theoretically, there was no reason why it should not be, it had a limitless supply of power to energise the drive-pack. It was quite obvious that it was on automatic control - the onboard computer was doing the driving. It should have been possible to override the computer from the ground, but override commands were being ignored.

He was updated with the latest report when he stepped from the suborbiter which had taken him to Salem. The Shuttle was on the ground. As far as could be determined, it had not crashed but made a soft landing. All attempts at communication had not produced a response. Michael glared at the silent group of advisors.

"This tells me sweet nothing! The Shuttle has landed, that's fine - but what about Leah Steinbecker?"

The blank looks were an eloquent answer. One of the braver souls ventured.

"Land parties are on the way to the landing position. They expect to be there within twelve hours."

Michael looked astounded.

"Do you mean to tell me that there are no settlements in that region?"

"It's an extremely remote, mountainous area, brother ben Levi. The

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terrain is very rough and the local weather conditions extreme."

"Don't feed me meteorological jargon! What are the extreme conditions?"

"Blizzards, deep snow - "

"And you mean to say that the Shuttle landed in that?"

"Computer control would have brought it down safely in the most adverse conditions, brother ben Levi."

They had commandeered one of the reception rooms at the Terminal. A map of the area was displayed on one wall. Michael stared at the point which had been marked as being the landing site. There were few rivers, just a tangle of mountain ranges. Even in a two dimensional plane, it looked a bleak, inhospitable place. He shivered and murmured to himself.

"Leah! Why on earth would you want to take a trip into that region?"

"It's thousands of kilometres from Ambrose Suosin's base, brother ben Levi."

Michael took a good look at his informant for the first time. He judged him to be a man in his fifth century. He looked competent and a cut above the bureaucrats who were nervously hovering in the background.

"What do you do around here, brother?"

"I am Luke Belin, brother ben Levi. I'm on the staff of Flight Control."

"Doing what exactly, brother Belin - losing Deputy Administrators in the wilds of Mongolia?"

The man refused to be ruffled, his mouth eased into a grin.

"Reporting suspicious circumstances when they were brought to my attention, brother ben Levi!"

Michael stared at him and then nodded.

"I apologise - I guess I'm losing my objectivity. Stay close by - I might need an expert opinion."

The man nodded and receded a little into the crowd. Michael stared at the map again.

"If one Shuttle can make a landing in those conditions, so can others. I intend to go there - now!"

As he might have anticipated, there was a howl of protest. It went something along the lines that they had already - mislaid - a Deputy Administrator and they couldn't afford to lose her superior as well. He was needed in Salem, the news of Leah's disappearance had already circulated. On top of the assassination of Marcus, it was causing a great deal of unrest. The populace needed a stabilising hand. Michael was forced to reluctantly agree, political pressures were building - and as yet, the reason for Leah's flight and her disappearance had not been answered.

He was in two minds about leaving the Space Terminal. It was the last point of contact, the last place where Leah had been before she set off on her ill-fated flight. He brought himself up short. He was making the assumption that the flight was ill-fated. There was always a possibility that Leah had planned the whole thing - although for what purpose completely escaped him.

It was a flight to nowhere. He looked around for Luke Belin and gestured him to join him.

"Tell me, brother Luke, when did the Shuttle change direction? Did she file a flight plan before she left?"

"A flight plan was filed, but it wasn't followed. The Shuttle adopted this original course and it was maintained despite the difficult terrain on the flight

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path. She had to negotiate some high peaks in the ranges. She didn't go round them, the ship lifted over them."

"Is that usual - to set a direct course, I mean?"

Luke fingered his chin.

"I wouldn't call it usual - A pilot usually takes his ship up and then enters on to the predefined flight path when he's cleared the Terminal Air Space. This ship set a course and maintained it from the moment it left the ground - as if - "

"As if it was computer controlled, even during take-off!"

"It isn't unusual to allow the onboard computer control from the very beginning."

"So, she must have fed the destination co-ordinates into the computer before the ship began to move."

"It would seem so, brother Michael."

"Which means that she had a definite idea of where she was heading and what she wanted to do."

Michael turned to the silent group of Secretariat personnel.

"None of you had any idea of what Leah intended to do? She must have discussed the trip with someone."

There was a general shaking of heads. Michael sighed in exasperation.

"I find it hard to believe that a Deputy Administrator can organise a flight without at least one of her secretaries being aware of it. A Shuttle has to be requisitioned - am I to assume she did this herself? The destination host is usually informed of an intended visit by someone of Administrator rank, even if it's a confidential visit. She was going somewhere, someone must have known that she was about to pay them a visit!"

He looked at them hopefully but there was no sign of agreement. He exhaled again and turned back to the map. He glared at the indicated landing site and tried to picture the conditions in his mind's eye. There was a timid cough. He turned hopefully and looked into the eyes of a small man.

"We thought perhaps - er - we thought that Leah might have been making a private visit - for - er - personal reasons."

Michael stared relentlessly.

"What personal reasons? Don't tell me that she had some man tucked away and she was off on what used to be called a dirty weekend!"

The man looked scandalised and shifted his eyes in every direction excepting that of Michael.

"We - er - that is - correspondence with your headquarters indicated that you were - er - away. So we thought that you and she - er - "

Michael's glare didn't waver.

"In the wilds of Mongolia! I can assure you, brother. If I wanted an assignation with Leah Steinbecker, I would choose a more idyllic and romantic destination than a freezing yurt in the middle of an icefield!"

Michael headed towards the door. He hesitated and turned.

"Brother Belin, you'd better come with me - and one of you had better ensure that his superior is informed!"

Requests for holo-links with Ambrose Suosin and Kurt Weber awaited him when he arrived at the Administration offices. He delayed responded until he obtained the latest reports from the Control Centre. There was nothing fresh in them, other than the failure of air search parties to become airborne

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in the worsening conditions. The cramp of muscles in his stomach intensified. If the conditions in the area were worsening, it followed that Leah's chances of survival were decreasing. The thought would not leave him that she might already be dead and all they would find would be her frozen corpse in the shell of the Shuttle.

He took each of the holo-links in private - a one on one meeting with each of the Area Stewards. Ambrose was the first. His Mongolian face was set in solemn lines and the familiar grin was gone.

"I want to assure you Michael, that I've put every available man into the parties trying to reach the crash site. The weather has closed in, air traffic is impossible in the region - even flying on computer."

Michael nodded.

"I'm sure you're doing all you can, Ambrose. Tell me, didn't she give any clue where she was going?"

"Not to me, Michael - In any case, we had a visit from her only two days earlier - there was nothing out of the ordinary which would have caused her to come again so soon. I'd like to know what the hell is going on!"

"You and me both, Ambrose - Nothing about this business makes any sense. I'll keep you informed."

He broke the link and established another with Kurt Weber. The big man glowered at him when his image had stabilised.

"I want to know what is happening, brother ben Levi."

Michael stared at him and tried to control his temper.

"When I know what is happening, brother Weber, you will be one of the first to know!"

"First we have Marcus being blasted out of the sky - and now, Leah is grounded in some godforsaken spot and apparently, no one can reach her!"

"I am assured that everything possible is being done to get to her, brother Weber."

"It might have escaped your notice, brother ben Levi, but the Steinbeckers - and Leah in particular - are well respected in this part of the world. A lot of questions are being asked about this sequence of events and our citizens are getting very restless."

"It hadn't escaped my notice, brother Weber - on the other hand, I am quite sure you are more than qualified to ease the minds of the citizens under your control. You can tell them from me that I have no intention of leaving Salem until Leah is found - alive or dead - and until I am satisfied about the circumstances of her trip.

It is also my intention to identify and punish the person or persons responsible for the death of Marcus Steinbecker. You can take that as a firm commitment, brother Weber. I trust that you will make it known to the citizens of the Gazera Province!"

Kurt Weber held his gaze without blinking. It was a test of wills, eventually, it was Weber who lowered his eyes. Michael was quite sure that it wasn't often that the big man yielded ground.

It was already late in the day. The latest estimate from the nearest party to the site of the grounded Shuttle was that it would take another six hours to trek into the wilderness at the present rate. Conditions were worsening, there was no guarantee that the pace could be maintained. Michael's pessimism increased, he felt so utterly powerless to help the woman he loved. He remembered the words Feodor had murmured only

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twenty-four hours earlier. It was something on the lines of:

'I thought Administrators were all powerful. If I was in your shoes, I wouldn't allow twenty thousand kilometres to get in the way of the woman I loved. I'd transfer her to Jerusalem and tell her that she was indispensable - I wouldn't stand any arguments!'

Administrators were all powerful! He wouldn't allow twenty thousand kilometres to get in the way of the woman he loved! Well! - These circumstances went to prove that Administrators were not all powerful and distance could indeed be a barrier which could not be bridged so easily. Michael wished he had followed his original impulse to fly out to the Shuttle's location. He would have been nearer and perhaps, he could have done something. All he could do now, was wait and hope - and pray.

The office where Leah usually worked, was silent. It felt like a tomb. He forced himself to dismiss the morbid thought. No one knew her condition - not until they reached the grounded shuttle. He went over the two conversations he had had earlier. The contrast between the two Stewards was extreme. They were both very able men. The way they were handling the adverse conditions in their areas of responsibility had increased his estimation of them to that of admiration.

Leah had nothing but glowing reports of their capabilities. It was the difference in their acceptance of him in his role of Administrator, which gave the greatest concern. There was no doubt, that from the very beginning, both had resented the fact that an outsider had taken over the reins after the death of Marcus. It had been obvious when the Firstling had announced it and it had remained so ever since. The appointment of Leah had gone a long way towards pacifying their ruffled feathers - but now Leah was gone - or at the very least, isolated in the wilds of Mongolia, her condition unknown.

It came back to the whole question of what was happening. Ambrose had asked: 'What the hell is going on?' Kurt Weber had been equally direct: 'A lot of questions are being asked about this sequence of events.'

A sequence of events? Was that what was happening? A hellish sequence of events which involved the murder of one man and now, the disappearance of his wife? Who would seek to gain from the removal of Marcus and Leah? Michael came to the reluctant conclusion that the ones most likely to benefit from the removal of an Administrator and a Deputy Administrator, were those who would be in line to replace them - the answer to his question was the two men with whom he had spoken through the holo-link!

It was an unpalatable conclusion, but it was viable. Both men had enough influence and followers to set in motion the ways and means to cause the suborbiter to be lost. Either of them would have the power to make things happen for the right price. The common factor between Marcus and Leah was that of intervention during a flight. Marcus's suborbiter had exploded. Leah's Shuttle had been tampered with in some way so that computer control could not be overridden and it had been brought down in an inaccessible spot.

Michael got to his feet, not so much to stretch his legs but to shed some excess energy. The inactivity was driving him insane. His tension threatened to swamp him. He fought it and forced himself to sit down once again. It was one thing to have his suspicions about Ambrose Suosin and Kurt Weber, but quite another to prove them.

The hours dragged by. He gave up trying to force progress reports

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from his weary staff - there were none. He could only assume that the search parties were still making progress. It would be agonisingly slow and they would have to fight for every step in the gale force winds screaming through the mountain passes.

He remained slumped in the big swivel chair for the next seven hours. He must have dozed for part of the time. It was already getting light when he was wakened by the sound of the door control indicating that he had a visitor. He activated the lock and Luke Belin marched briskly in.

"I thought you ought to know - A search party has established contact with the Shuttle!"

Michael rose slowly.

"And?"

"First reports indicate that it was empty!"

"Empty?"

"That's correct, brother Michael - No passengers - and no crew."

Michael stared at him.

"Dear God! Don't tell me that she was foolish enough to leave the ship and try to walk out!"

Luke shook his head.

"What we have from the site so far is sketchy - they're having a devil of a job with the communication links - but there's no evidence that she left the ship."

He paused and looked out into the grey sky.

"Go on!"

"There are a few peculiarities."

Once again he hesitated. Michael exploded.

"Come to the point, Belin, before I come to the boil!"

Belin nodded.

"OK - Firstly, when the search party reached the ship, the outer doors were closed - Now, you'll appreciate, if Leah had walked away from the Shuttle, she would almost certainly have left them open - "

"Not necessarily! She might have closed them after her."

"True - but there is another peculiarity. For some reason, there was some heavy items of equipment within the ship's cabin - mining equipment - pumps, that sort of thing. It was stored against the exit doors. When the search party reached the ship and opened them from the outside, some of it fell out on their legs - fortunately, no one was injured. It was heavy stuff, not the sort of gear a woman would haul around by choice - and it would have been virtually impossible to close the doors from the outside, with it being positioned in the way it was."

Michael asked slowly.

"So - What conclusions can we draw from this?"

Luke hesitated.

"There is a strong possibility that Leah Steinbecker was never on the ship! We could come to the conclusion that it was empty when it left Salem. I've made a few enquiries during the night. No one actually saw Leah board the shuttle. The ship's onboard computer relayed the flight plan to Control and organised all the departure checks. No one actually spoke to Leah on the ship, either before it left or after."

Michael returned to his seat.

"A few hours ago, someone asked me what the hell is going on - now,

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I'm asking the same question. You're suggesting that Leah was never on the Shuttle - the implications are that she is still in Salem. The next questions for which we have to have answers is: Was it her decision to disappear? Did she organise this elaborate charade? Or did someone decide and organise it for her?"

"There is another possibility - she may not be in Salem, she might have been shipped out on another Shuttle and the one we've been chasing was a red herring to keep us off her track until the trail grew cold."

Michael stared at him.

"Why would she do that?"

"I didn't suggest she was a willing party, Michael!"

Michael nodded.

"But if she was?"

"She might have got wind of something she couldn't handle in any other way."

Michael shook his head.

"There would have been some hint of it - her staff know nothing."

"They say they know nothing!"

He returned Michael's steady stare without blinking.

"You are suggesting a conspiracy - in which her personal staff are involved - damn it, Luke! Most of these people are her close relatives within the Clan-family. Steinbeckers to the core! While we're on that subject - she left her two children here. I would hardly expect her to organise her own disappearance and abandon them!"

"All the more reason to look for a conspiracy, brother Michael. Not every family member loves another - most of mine hate me!"

He laughed but it didn't sound like humour.

"Perhaps, you ought to start looking closer to home!"

16.

Rebecca carefully manoeuvred her tray through the entrance of the reception room, into which she had shown her visitor. It was the hour when she 'took tea' and when he had arrived, it had been a foregone conclusion that she would include him in the ritual. Michael ben Levi had come alone, which was a little surprising. Administrators usually had at least one or two aides accompanying them wherever they went. The reason for him arriving unaccompanied, had yet to be revealed.

She had been careful to include a choice of teas in those available for her guest and the plate of small cakes which she offered him were also of a more than usual variety. There could be no doubt that his visit had much to do with the disappearance of Leah, but she had been careful not to press the point until they were comfortably seated and armed with her refreshments.

"I must tell you, brother ben Levi, I am greatly concerned about Leah. What is the latest information? Have you yet reached her Shuttle?"

Michael had placed an embargo on releasing the information from the

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search party. He was pleased to see that Rebecca did not seem to have been informed. He lowered his teacup from his lips.

"We have no definite information about Leah's condition as yet, sister Rebecca."

He thought he detected a little puzzlement, but in all his dealings with Rebecca, she had always managed to maintain a strictly neutral expression - it was hard to read her reaction.

"I was given to understand that a search party would have reached the landing area by this time - "

"The weather conditions have closed in - they're having a great deal of difficulty getting through - "

"I am extremely concerned for her safety."

It was the second time she had used the word concerned. He couldn't read a great deal into it.

"As we all are, sister Rebecca - but we are in the hands of the search parties. I'm told that it is impossible to make an aerial search. We can draw a certain amount of comfort from the fact that the Shuttle appears to have made a soft landing and that it is equipped with atmospheric control which should keep Leah reasonably comfortable - unless, of course, she was unwise enough to leave the safety of the ship."

Rebecca placed her cup on the side table very carefully.

"Leah can be a very impetuous young woman, brother ben Levi. I do hope she doesn't try to be heroic."

"I doubt if she would do anything so foolish as to leave the ship - of course, if she did, we would have serious cause for alarm."

"Indeed - I'm so glad the children are here, safe and well, with me."

"I agree with you - whatever prompted Leah to make her journey, I am very pleased that she didn't consider taking the children."

"Of course, she never takes them with her when she's on official business."

"You are assuming that she was on official business? Would you have any idea why she would have taken a flight into that area? Did she, perhaps, discuss her plans with you?"

"Leah never discussed her official business with me, brother ben Levi - unless it was in connection with packing for some journey. On this occasion, she gave no indication at all."

"That could be significant - If you usually packed baggage for a trip and didn't on this occasion, Leah must have done so herself."

"Which would only go to prove that her reasons were extremely secretive. I have always packed for Leah - and for Marcus when he was - alive."

Michael stared at her, the placid mask had shivered a little, now it was restored.

"Then, you would be in a very good position to tell me how much of her clothing has been taken."

She eyed him without blinking.

"If necessary, I could check her wardrobe - but surely, this is a little premature, Leah will be found when the Shuttle is reached?"

"Only if she hasn't decided to try - heroics - I think that was the word you used. Only if she hasn't tried to walk out from the landing site."

Rebecca rose stiffly.

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"I shall make an immediate check, brother ben Levi."

"I would be most grateful, sister Steinbecker. One more thing - I am quite sure Leah would wish me to stay here during my visit to Salem. It will be a prolonged visit - certainly, until we have ensured that Leah is safe and sound and restored to us. Then, there is the question of the unfinished investigation into Marcus's death. I intend to find who is responsible for both incidents - and to bring them to account!"

Her rigid face didn't move.

"I am quite sure we all want Leah returned to us - and we want to find out who was responsible for what happened to Marcus. We will be honoured to have the Administrator share our roof. I will ensure that you have adequate quarters - for your staff as well."

"I will have one secretary with me - and an advisor. If the additional two will not be an imposition on your hospitality."

"They are as welcome as you are yourself, brother ben Levi."

The door closed behind her and Michael relaxed, he grinned slightly. The woman was certainly living up to Leah's description of her being a dragon. He rose from the chair and opened the door into the main foyer - it was deserted. Leah's communication room was on the other side of the hall. He took a security master holo-cube from his pocket and inserted it into the lock. He placed his eye close to an aperture for the obligatory retina scan. The door opened without hesitation and the room beyond flooded with light. When he had entered, the door closed behind him automatically and security was restored.

He checked the input message files. There was nothing outstanding. Leah must have cleared all unfinished business before she left - or was taken - away from the house. He had ordered an immediate freeze on subsequent communiqués. Now, he activated the connection to the Salem Headquarters and a holo-link into their control room. The image of his secretary stabilised from the shimmer of light.

"What's happening, Simon?"

"The search party has confirmed that there is no trace of Leah at the landing site. They have scanned the ship - there is no trace of her ever having been on board. The checks included fingerprints - and even DNA comparisons from waste disposal. We can say categorically, that Leah was never on the ship!"

"So - Luke Belin called it correctly."

"It would seem so, Michael."

"What about the interviews with Terminal staff?"

"We've drawn a blank. No one admits to seeing Leah Steinbecker since she left the Administration Office on the evening when the Shuttle left the terminal. We have traced her boarding her Pod for the journey out to your location. She remained there for three hours and then her Pod returned to the Salem Terminal. Someone says that he saw her leaving the Pod when it arrived, but beyond that we have found no trace."

"This person who saw her - is he sure it was Leah?"

"He says a woman left the Pod. She was shrouded up against the cold - he assumed it was Leah."

Michael thought about it for a while.

"Simon, I want an exhaustive check on all Pod traffic to and from the Steinbecker Estate, from the time Leah arrived home from the office until four

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hours after the departure of the Shuttle. At the same time, I want a complete check on all Pod traffic leaving the Terminal from the hour that Leah was supposedly seen leaving her Pod - make it for the same time scale. I want you to check every passenger and get independent verification that they were who they said they were. Check every Pod onboard computer for identity verification - and Simon, be thorough!"

"I'll get right on to it, boss."

"Good man!"

"There's one other thing, Michael - we have a holo-link request from Feodor Chernienko, it's been patched through from Jerusalem Control."

"I'll take it here."

Simon's image faded from the holo-pad and was replaced by that of Feodor. He looked to be in an advanced stage of impatience.

"Greetings, Michael - you're a hard man to contact! I've been chasing you half way across the planet!"

"And didn't move your butt from your seat!"

There was a flicker of a grin.

"I didn't expect to run you to earth in Salem of all places - or perhaps I did! What are you up to - following my advice to sweep the lady off her feet?"

Michael eyed him solemnly.

"I might just do that - when I catch up with her."

"Now you're talking sense! - Enough of the chit-chat! Georgi Malenski is on the move!"

"Is he now? He hasn't allowed the grass to grow under his feet. Is he heading in your direction?"

"No - at least, not the bulk of his people. They look to be spreading out through Grigor's province. The main concentration is still moving to the west, well north of my boundary. My advisers tell me that Georgi's about to meet the groups coming down from Scandia. When that happens, I don't think the greetings will be very polite, we might expect to see some sparks flying."

"We might also see Georgi's group being forced to the south by the pressure of that contact - or sheer weight of numbers. Watch your northern frontier, Feodor."

"It's Anatole Barenkov I'm worried about. He could find himself right in the line of fire."

"An unfortunate turn of phrase, Feodor. I hope it doesn't come to that."

"Let's not kid ourselves, Michael - it WILL come to that before we're very much older!"

They closed the link and Michael remained staring at the empty space. He couldn't expect any results from Simon's enquiries for a while. It would take time to check through the records and perform the verifications he had demanded. He hated the delay, every instinct urged him to take a personal hand in tracking down the people who were responsible for Leah's disappearance. The same instinct told him that when he did, he would be confronted with the killers of Marcus Steinbecker.

There was something he could do. He accessed the personnel files of all those who formed the immediate staff around Leah. He included those who had left her employment since the death of Marcus. He soon found that the name Steinbecker occurred with monotonous regularity. It smacked of nepotism. He smiled grimly, Marcus - and Joel before him, had drawn heavily on their cousins - near and remote. He reminded himself that there were a

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tremendous number of people with the name Steinbecker and surely, it should not have prohibited them from obtaining employment in the Administration. Nevertheless, it was a factor to be considered. He went through them again and one name stood out - David Steinbecker.

He leaned back in his chair and tried to remember him. He was the ineffectual assistant to Marcus. He was the one who had seemed almost pleased when it was suggested to him that he might find other employment more convivial. Michael touched a control and a holo-image of the young man was formed on the holo-pad. It was a sculpture in light. Michael set the controls to make it slowly rotate. David Steinbecker looked an innocuous young man. He wore a look of anxiety, as if he was desperately trying to please. He looked as if he was about to shrink into the woodwork.

Michael glanced at his list of interests. None of them were of a robust nature. He was what he looked, a man interested in history, a bookworm in the old-fashioned sense. There was every indication that he was a mild mannered man who would go out of his way not to cause offence. On the surface, he was hardly a candidate for an assassin - or for a kidnapper - but what was under the surface? That was something the rotating holo-model could not show him. He cancelled the display and David faded into obscurity.

It didn't matter what he looked on the surface, he would stand investigation. There were few other leads and every possibility had to be exhausted. David Steinbecker would soon find himself having to explain where he had spent every minute of the day on which Leah, his remote cousin, had disappeared.

Perhaps, it was the thought of cousins which prompted him, but Michael found himself keying in the co-ordinates for the display of the Steinbecker genealogical tree. He ignored the top layers. Everyone knew that Carl was the progenitor and that Joel and Amos were his sons. Marcus's position in the hierarchy was easy to identify. Leah occurred a few generations further and by this time, there was quite a tangle of cross relationships, which would have given a genealogist nightmares to try to untangle. It wasn't unusual, the ben Levi family tree was no better.

He found Rebecca, she was a second cousin to Marcus - so far as he was able to deduce. A further survey located David - he was a third cousin to Marcus and an undefinable something to Leah - but - he was a nephew to Rebecca!

Michael stared at the information and then, very slowly, expunged it from the screen. The blankness was more comfortable. He knew he was alone in the secure room, but that little bit of information made him suddenly wary of hidden eyes watching his every move. Luke Belin had said something to the effect that he should look closer to home. He wondered if the man was very astute, or whether he knew more than he was saying. Michael opened the link to Salem.

"Simon, when you are finished there, come out to the Steinbecker estate - and bring Luke Belin with you!"

He closed down the communication centre and sealed the room, when he turned, Rebecca was standing a few paces from him. He stared into her bland face.

"I thought you would like to know, brother ben Levi. I have prepared rooms for yourself and your staff. If you would be so good as to follow me."

"You are most kind, sister Steinbecker."

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Michael wasn't a man given to being frightened by dark corners, but the feeling of apprehension wouldn't leave him, even when Rebecca had closed the door panel after her. He had looked at her ramrod straight back, as she had led him to the guest chamber. She wasn't a young woman and looked what she was - a housekeeper. Her hair was drawn back severely off her face. It was tied in a knot at the back. It was hardly an attractive style but it was functional. That was the word which summed her up - functional. She gave the impression of quiet efficiency. She presented an impersonal face to the world. He wondered what was under the surface, the hidden, deeper currents. Perhaps they were strong enough for kidnapping and murder.

The thought increased his tension. Leah could already be dead. Marcus had been murdered, there was no reason why Leah should be kept alive! He tried to remember what she had told him about Rebecca - it wasn't much. He was aware that there was not a great deal of love lost between them and that it seemed to hinge on the fact that Marcus had brought a young wife into a household that had been dominated by the older woman. Thereafter, there had been conflict over the children. Leah had believed that Rebecca had a covert desire to appropriate her children. It was another factor to puzzle him. Why would an ageing woman want to saddle herself with two young children and exclude the natural mother? Perhaps the answer to that question was the reason why Marcus was dead and Leah was missing.

He sat down in an easy chair and looked out into the night. The wintry storms had died down over recent days, there were even a few stars shining through the broken clouds. Leah's home had always impressed him as being a haven of peace - perhaps it was its long association with Joel and Carl before him. It had represented continuity but now he felt threatened, there were covert forces at work and he knew that their application would be quite ruthless, if he showed signs of getting too near to the truth. He would need to move very carefully.

It was a relief when Simon was shown up to his room by the stony faced Rebecca. He was followed by rangy figure of Luke Belin. Michael thanked Rebecca with a display of old world courtesy which provoked a snort of derision from Simon, when they were alone.

"There are times when you lay your fatal charm on with a trowel, Michael!"

His smile faded when Michael responded with a growl.

"Keep your voice down, Simon!"

"What's going on, boss?"

Michael flicked a glance at Luke Belin. The tall man was leaning against the window frame and gazing into the darkness.

"Ask him! he knows a few answers - which he is about to tell us!"

Luke turned, his expression was serious.

"I wouldn't trust that witch for longer than her broom handle."

"Is that an old Russian saying?"

"I wouldn't know, Simon. Michael is beginning to get the picture about our unfriendly hostess."

"Tell us what you know."

"I know nothing - that's the problem. There are a lot of rumours - most of which are whispered behind hands. You get to hear a lot of family gossip when you work together with the Steinbeckers."

"And you work together with the Steinbeckers at Terminal Control?"

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"Tell me where you don't work together with the Steinbeckers - they're everywhere!"

"I had noticed - go on - what did you hear from your particular contact with the Steinbeckers?"

"An odd word here and there. Rebecca is a bit of a joke with some of them - others seem to fear her. The ones who think she's hilarious, see her a frustrated spinster who had tried to bed Marcus for centuries with no success. The man was simply not interested. The final blow came when he arrived home with a young bride and produced children in quick succession. The peculiarity is that Rebecca has taken the children under her wing like a broody hen and absolutely dotes on them. It's almost as if she saw herself as a proxy wife to Marcus and a mother to the children he gave to another woman."

Michael growled.

"It sounds like a recipe for disaster - and that's what we have. What else do your whisperers say?"

"They clammed up after Marcus's death. It looked to me as if they suddenly became frightened."

"Rebecca was no longer considered amusing?"

"More than that - it was genuine fear. In the days just before Marcus took the fatal flight, a few things were said. Leah was away - "

"In Jerusalem - "

"Right - The word was that Marcus was wandering around looking as if the bottom had dropped out of his world - and Rebecca was queen of the castle."

"Meaning?"

"Meaning that she had Marcus and his children to herself and she thought it would only be a matter of time before it would be official. The general opinion within the family was that Leah wasn't coming back - she was supposed to have flown away into the arms of her lover!"

Simon looked scandalised and glared at the ceiling. Luke maintained his direct gaze into Michael's eyes. The Administrator murmured.

"And then, Marcus decided to follow Leah to Jerusalem for Asher's committal."

There was a profound silence before Michael went on.

"But is this a good enough reason for the murder of Marcus Steinbecker. Does it make sense that he would be killed by a disappointed, would-be lover?"

Luke shrugged.

"Stranger things have happened. If the mind becomes unbalanced, people do irrational things.

Simon protested.

"I don't think that would include killing the man one wanted to marry."

"Why not? Perhaps, it was the case of the last attempt failing. Marcus was on his way to be reunited with his wife - the wife who was supposed to have run away to be in the arms of another man."

"But, what about Leah in all this?"

Michael interjected.

"The answer is very simple. It comes down to the children! The children are central to the whole issue. The reasoning runs along these lines. If the father finally shows himself to be unattainable, kill him! The mother has

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always been resented and is now in the way, so, dispose of her. That leaves the children - and a proxy mother!"

17.

They were interrupted by the sound of the door control. Simon and Luke exchanged glances. Michael placed his finger to his lips.

"Follow my lead!"

He activated the door panel and Rebecca stepped through. Her expression was carefully neutral.

"I have prepared dinner for twenty hundred hours, brother ben Levi. If you and your staff would care to prepare for it."

Michael's tone was honey sweet.

"I am most grateful for your consideration. I feel we are putting you to a great deal of extra trouble."

"Not at all, brother ben Levi - it is my pleasure."

For a moment, there was animation. He almost could believe that she meant what she said. She continued carefully.

"Is there any news of Leah?"

Michael's face creased into a beaming smile.

"You will be happy to know that she's been found - and is very well!"

The bland face twitched into a smile. It quickly faded.

"That is exceptionally good news, brother ben Levi!"

"I knew you would be delighted, sister Steinbecker!"

She made her exit and Michael turned to face his two assistants.

"How quickly we have learned to lie with conviction."

Simon objected.

"She doesn't believe it, Michael!"

"Of course she doesn't believe it - but she doesn't know what I'm up to - and my objective is to keep her off balance. Did you arrange for monitoring all communications from the house?"

Simon nodded.

"I think we can assume that sister Rebecca will be contacting someone to reassure herself that Leah is where she's placed her."

"Unless - "

"You were going to say, 'unless Leah is dead'. I am praying that Rebecca decided to be cautious - especially after Marcus's death."

"If Rebecca is really the one responsible - "

Michael turned to Luke.

"Are you telling me you have doubts?"

"You mustn't forget Deborah and Gideon."

"Marcus's daughter and son."

"The Steinbecker whisperers are not very complementary when they are the subject."

"I find it hard to swallow that they would kill their own father!"

"You might be right - but they despised Leah, especially Deborah. Gideon is ploddingly ruthless. He gets what he wants by wearing down the

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opposition. Deborah, on the other hand, is spiteful and totally unprincipled. Kidnapping could be her style."

Simon declared.

"My bet is still on Rebecca."

"In which case, we had better watch our step when we're in this house."

A few minutes before eight, they made their way to the dining room. Promptly on the hour, Rebecca appeared dressed in her evening finery. Michael took her arm and escorted her to the table. Out of the tail of his eye, he saw the irrepressible Simon gesture his arm to Luke - it was declined.

Michael sat opposite his hostess and appraised the change in her appearance. The dowdy housekeeper was subtly altered. He had to acknowledge that she was still a fine looking woman. He couldn't help wondering why she had chosen to bury herself in the thankless task of caring for the Steinbecker estate - Perhaps it was the only way she could see of being near the man she wanted. She looked up suddenly and he switched on his smile.

"Forgive me for staring, sister Rebecca. I must compliment you - you look radiant! Don't you think so, Simon?"

"Oh! Indeed, brother Michael. Absolutely radiant!"

"You are both most kind."

"May I add my wholehearted agreement?"

Luke was displaying hidden diplomatic talents.

Rebecca bowed acknowledgement.

"Please tell me more about Leah."

"Details are still very sketchy, I'm afraid - and communication with the area is deplorable. The nearest search party reached the Shuttle just a few hours ago. They found it undamaged and reported that the occupant - or occupants - had stayed with the ship. There was some problem opening the outer door, but they have assured us that they could see someone inside who was co-operating in trying to clear the entrance."

"Can we be quite sure that it is Leah?"

Michael looked astonished.

"I think we can rest assured it is - after all, there is only one shuttle missing and the occupant must be Leah!"

"But - she hasn't actually been identified?"

"It can only be a matter of time! You can be absolutely confident that Leah will be home with us soon - and then we shall learn the whole story!"

They continued their meal, the conversation turned to trivia. Michael deliberately took his time. He looked supremely at ease, complimenting the dishes and admiring the wine. It was fully two hours before they were finished.

"This has been a most enjoyable evening - with a most charming hostess. I can assure you, sister Rebecca, you are a rare jewel, who has chosen to hide herself away. Your presence would have graced the finest gatherings in the world."

She flushed a little, the colour quickly subsided.

"I have only ever wanted to serve in this house, brother ben Levi."

"And what a magnificent house it is - such history! You must have seen many wonderful events take place here - especially in the time of Father Joel. Then, you would have seen Marcus bring home Judith - and have

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watched their children grow - and now, another generation is growing up in this ancient house!"

He sounded a little tipsy.

"They have been pleasurable years."

The mask was back again. Michael smiled genially.

"I really think it must be time for bed - it's been a long day."

He thanked their hostess once more and then made his way to his bed chamber. Simon and Luke followed and closed the door after them. They eyed each other solemnly.

"One of these days, Michael, I will have to get you well and truly drunk - you would have to be the world's worst actor!"

"Let's hope Rebecca is less critical, Simon."

"What did you make of our hostess?"

"She doesn't give much away - I think we'd better check if she's made any calls."

The corridor was deserted. They made their way quickly to the Communication room. Simon made a quick check and gestured with his hands.

"Nothing! She hasn't bought our story. She either knows it can't be true, or she's waiting. Either way, she's confident."

Michael sat on the edge of the bench.

"We have to think of something to force her out into the open."

Luke murmured.

"If you find the right lever she might crack."

Michael drummed his fingers on the bench top.

"Simon, let's run a check on the present location of Gideon and Deborah - and whilst you're at it, track down David Steinbecker - the one I fired for incompetence - he's Rebecca's nephew!"

Luke pursed his lips in a silent whistle.

"The plot thickens."

"Now, my friend, Luke - let's see if we can come up with the right lever!"

Michael was back in the control room early on the following morning. A neatly itemised list of Pod movements was awaiting display. Most of them had checked out and the occupants had proved to be bone fide. However, there was one from the Terminal which appeared to go nowhere and the occupant had not been traced.

"This one looks interesting."

"We're following that one up, Michael."

"What do we have so far?"

"Leah's Pod arrived at the Terminal at 19.07 hours. Eleven minutes later, a woman boarded this one and set a destination for the main parking area in the city centre."

"What about identification verification?"

"There was none!"

"How is that possible?"

"There was no positive destination - it was a casual ride from the Terminal to the city - thousands of people do the same thing every day."

"I thought there was an automatic retina read."

"There is - but there are literally millions of them taken every day - we're still working on it!"

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"All right! I wasn't trying to be critical. On the subject of identification - was Leah positively identified as being the passenger from here to the terminal?"

"No - for the same reason - "

"I think we have to determine that as a matter of urgency."

"We're working on it."

"How about incoming traffic to the estate?"

"There was only one movement - Rebecca Steinbecker returning from an excursion to the city - that was at 22.18."

"And she was positively identified?"

"Yes - because we have the access identification records from the in-house computer."

"What about Leah leaving the house on the night of her supposed journey to the Terminal?"

"She is shown as leaving the house."

"Interesting!"

"I'm glad you think so - I don't think we're very much further forward."

"Not so, Simon! We can start to put a picture together. I predict that if we ask Rebecca about her visit to Salem on the day in question, she'll be quite happy to confirm that she was nowhere near the house in the early evening - when Leah was supposed to have left. Conscious or unconscious, Leah is recorded as having left the house. She could have been carried out and put in a Pod with its controls set to take her elsewhere. I suggest that a second by second examination of its progress from here to Salem will reveal that there was a short stop somewhere on the way. It will be nothing significant - just a few seconds which would normally be ignored. Perhaps the mysterious lady took Leah's place. When she arrived at the Terminal, she dismounted and made her way to the other Pod, which she took to the city centre - "

"And from the city centre, Rebecca returned home - "

They stared at each other.

"It's very feasible, Michael - but it doesn't tell us what they did with Leah."

"It also tells us that there is more than one person involved. Whoever was responsible must have had help!"

During the morning, the information he had requested about the location of Gideon and Deborah Steinbecker, was patched through from Salem Control. Gideon was in the South American Administrative area, no doubt relentlessly wearing down Ruis Peres in the pursuit of some advantageous deal. Deborah was much nearer at hand. She was visiting Steinbecker relatives resident in the Gazera Province. Michael felt a prickle of apprehension. Perhaps his earlier assessment of Kurt Weber had not been so wide of the mark.

He looked through the report again. Deborah had arrived in the provincial capital one day after the shuttle supposedly carrying Leah, had left Salem. She had travelled by Pod with a woman companion and a pilot. Since that time, she had been indisposed at the home of an absentee Steinbecker cousin. Michael reached for his communicator. He gave precise instructions to the chief of the security group who had accompanied him from Jerusalem. Then, he judged it was time to inform Rebecca of his intentions.

She joined him, at his request, in a small reception room adjacent to

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where dinner had been served on the previous evening. He placed her in a chair with all the deference one was expected to show to the older generation. She acknowledged his courtesy with a brief smile. Michael came to the point.

"I thought I should be the one to tell you the happy news, sister Rebecca. We have found Leah!"

She looked at him steadily.

"I was under the impression that you had done so yesterday, brother ben Levi."

He smiled gently.

"I hope you will excuse my little deception - there was a very good reason why I had to give that impression. In fact, Leah was never on the stranded shuttle. I have located her in the Gazera province and at this very moment, my personal staff are on their way to escort her home."

She was ramrod straight.

"I see - "

"We shall soon know what this mysterious disappearance is all about - but I wanted you to be the first to know. I know how worried you have been."

She rose.

"I am most grateful, brother ben Levi."

"Just a word of caution, sister Steinbecker. We must keep this conversation strictly confidential - at least until we are sure that Leah is released unharmed."

She nodded and moved slowly to the door and Michael followed her with his eyes. She was totally controlled. It was ten minutes later when the door opened once again, this time it was Simon. He nodded.

"The call has been made."

"You know what to do - there must be no other calls."

Simon nodded again and left him. Michael stretched out his long legs in a fair imitation of casual pleasure. In reality, his heart was racing, the next hour was going to be critical. He reminded himself that his men knew what they were doing, but the uneasy feeling persisted that he was dealing with ruthless and unprincipled people who would stop at nothing. It was a feeling which would not go away. He glanced at his chronometer, it was nearly noon and the minutes were dragging. He tried to visualise what might be happening eight hundred kilometres away in Gazera.

Another quarter hour passed and the door opened once more, it was Rebecca. She looked a little agitated.

"Brother ben Levi - there appears to be something wrong with our communication links to the city!"

Michael blinked in surprise and sat to attention.

"Are you quite sure, sister Rebecca?"

"I cannot contact anyone outside of the estate!"

"That IS unusual - I'll ask Simon to look into it - in the meantime, if you have an urgent message, perhaps I can relay it for you through the Communication Room?"

"I assure you, brother Michael, that will not be necessary."

"It would be no trouble, but if you are quite sure, sister Rebecca."

"I'm quite sure, thank you."

She left him alone again and a slow smile crept up from his lips. He wiped it away as the door opened once more. This time, it was Simon who

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entered. Michael leaned forward.

"Well?"

"Very well - alive and well - if a little weak!"

Michael leaned back and closed his eyes in relief. He felt a little weak himself! Simon went on.

"The interested parties have been persuaded to join us for talks."

"That should be very interesting. Perhaps you would ask our sister Rebecca to rejoin us, Simon - and Luke Belin also."

"With pleasure, Michael!"

Luke was the first to arrive. He was wearing a broad grin. He had no time to comment, Rebecca almost trailed him through the door.

"You asked to see me, brother ben Levi?"

"Yes indeed, sister. I thought you would like to know that we have just released Leah from detention in premises in the Gazera Province. There will now be a full investigation and all those directly or indirectly involved will be brought to account. I have no doubt that we will find a link with the murder of your cousin, Marcus. I felt sure you would be delighted to hear the good news!

Oh! There is one other thing. I would like you to prepare John and Rachael for a visit to their mother. Leah has particularly asked for them to be brought to her. In fact, you might pack all their clothing! It is my intention to take Leah and the children back with me to Jerusalem!"

Rebecca remained rigidly upright, her face impassive.

"If you insist, brother ben Levi."

"I most certainly do insist, sister Rebecca. Children should be with their mother - especially when she has been subjected to the sort of treatment Leah has experienced."

Michael turned to Luke Belin.

"Luke, perhaps you could assist Rebecca to make the children ready."

"That is quite unnecessary - "

"But I insist, my dear sister. Luke will help you!"

Their eyes locked in a battle of wills. This time she didn't try to hide her hatred. He didn't shrink from it, he had always known how it stood between them. She turned and left the room, followed closely by Luke Belin. Simon turned to Michael.

"Surely, you're not going to allow her to go free!"

"She will never be free - but she may still try something. Let's get the children out of her clutches first."

They waited until the children were brought to them. They immediately ran to Michael with squeals of delight. He caught them up in his arms.

"I am absolutely certain you grow bigger every time I come to see you."

"Are you going to take us to mummy?"

"Yes, we're going to your mummy, John."

Rebecca turned and walked to the door.

"I will pack your luggage, brother ben Levi."

"Ah! Thank you, sister Rebecca. I had almost forgotten that you always pack for a journey."

Simon followed her from the room.

Michael chattered with the children until Rebecca returned. She eyed him and the children with rigid formality.

"Say goodbye to Rebecca, children."

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He put them down and they ran across to her. She stooped and held them tightly to herself for a long moment. When she looked up, Michael was almost surprised to see the trace of a tear in her eyes. She made no gesture of farewell, other than to walk with them to the main entrance. Simon had organised the baggage. He stood by one of the larger Pods, as if he was on guard.

Rebecca remained at the top of the steps. Michael had to look up to her when he turned. She was the mistress of the ancient house. She was part of it, but he doubted whether it meant very much to her at that moment. There could be no doubt in her mind that she was seeing the last of the children she had considered to be her own.

Michael shepherded them into the Pod and took one last look at her. She remained motionless, not even raising her arm in farewell as the Pod gathered speed and moved away down the long avenue of cypresses which Joel had planted seven hundred years earlier. Michael was conscious of the history of the place and when they passed the outer security gate, it was as if an era had finally closed. What Carl had started, when he had moved from the lighthouse to this site in the hills, and what Joel had continued in his time, followed by Marcus and Leah, was now coming to an end.

The house was still in view. It commanded the crest of a hill and was visible long after they had left the immediate vicinity. They described a great curve, with the house as the focal point. The children were not interested in it, they were being kept busy by their new friend, Luke. Michael glanced at Simon.

"You did attend to the luggage?"

"It was stowed as you suggested."

They stared at the house, it would be their last opportunity. Soon, the Pod would turn to descend through a long winding valley to the outskirts of Salem. It was almost at that point when what they had anticipated happened. There was an eruption of smoke and flame from the centre of the single storied house. After a few moments, the percussion of an explosion rocked the Pod.

Silently, they watched the flames spreading along the spine of the building and soon, it was ablaze from end to end. The children turned and looked on solemnly. Michael doubted if they understood, or associated the smoke and flame with their home. Simon whispered.

"I returned our baggage to your room, as you instructed. How did you know what was going to happen?"

"I didn't - and I still can't understand how someone who is supposed to love these children, would deliberately plant a bomb which would have blown them to eternity. I will never understand Rebecca Steinbecker - I suppose she planted a bomb in Marcus's baggage before that fateful flight. She had come to realise that every hope was gone. I suppose she felt the same way about the children, she knew she would never meet them again - I told you, she would never be free - and she must have known, that soon, someone would have come for her and she would be brought to account!"

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The memory of the burning house stayed with Michael for the duration of the long journey into the Gazera Province. He had instructed Simon to set a route which bypassed Salem. He knew that the city would be buzzing with the news of the disaster at the Steinbecker estate and he had no desire to ward off droves of Steinbecker cousins who would be besieging the Administration Headquarters. It had to be faced that the Steinbecker clan was now split down the middle. With the discovery of Leah in the hands of Deborah and her co-conspirators and with the explosion and fire which had almost certainly killed Rebecca, there would be a rapid coalescence of support for or against. Michael was well aware that they were not out of the woods yet.

The children eventually fell asleep. He looked at them curled up in the arms of their new uncle, Luke. They were the innocent motive for so much mayhem. There could be little doubt that Rebecca had been mentally unbalanced, but she had purported to love those children. He couldn't get it out of his mind that if he hadn't suspected the baggage to have been planted with a bomb, these very children would have been included in the destruction Rebecca had planned for the Pod. It was clear that she had wanted to actually see it destroyed. The explosion had been timed so that it would have been in full view from the house.

They spent the remainder of the day negotiating the farmlands which stretched northward along the coast to Gazera. He kept a Communications silence, he had no idea of the extent of the conspiracy, or what its purpose might have been. Much would depend on what Deborah Steinbecker chose to tell them - and upon what Leah already knew.

It was almost sundown when they crossed a low range of hills and entered an isolated valley. The house, to which Deborah had taken Leah, came into view. It was in an attractive setting and even the cold winter sun couldn't negate the beauty of the place. They came to rest in the centre of a dozen craft which had carried his security men on their mission to release Leah.

A squad of them snapped to attention as he stepped from the Pod. Simon and Luke followed with the children. They were led into the house and into a ground floor room in which one person sat near to the window. The children ran forward and Leah was smothered in a flurry of kisses and excited chatter. Michael stood still a few paces distant and watched them. His two companions retreated from the room and left them alone. Eventually, she looked up.

"Michael - "

He knelt by the chair. She looked exhausted and very pale. He took her hand.

"Thank you so much - "

"I was worried sick about you - "

He kissed her cheek, it was very cold.

"How did you find me?"

"That's a long story - and now isn't the time."

He looked at the children.

"I think we have two very hungry and tired little people here."

"I'll look after them and put them to bed - "

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"We'll look after them and put them to bed!"

There was a trace of her old fire.

"I've never known a confirmed bachelor so determined to be a doting father!"

"You'd better believe it, Leah Steinbecker - you had better believe it!"

Luke appeared in the doorway with a large tray of steaming dishes.

"Who's going to help me to find the fishes swimming in my soup?"

Two small figures followed him from the room. Michael grinned.

"He is showing quite a few unsuspected talents."

"Who is he, Michael? I don't think I've ever seen him before."

"His name is Luke Belin. He attached himself to me when I arrived in Salem - apart from the fact that he seems to know a good deal more about the Steinbecker clan than some of the Steinbeckers - he is a bit of a mystery. You can thank him for pointing me in the right direction to find you. The children seem to have taken quite a shine to him."

"Can you trust him, Michael?"

"He hasn't given me any reason to do otherwise. After what's happened to you, I can understand your caution."

"Yes - after what happened to me - I hardly know what did happen to me."

"Do you want to talk about it?"

She nodded and leaned back in the chair.

"I suppose I'm stupid, I didn't suspect anything. There must have been warning signs but I was blind to them. Lately, Rebecca had established a pattern. You know this silly fetish about 'taking tea'? Well, she would arrive every afternoon at about the same hour with her tray of goodies. We would sit together and sip and nibble and make small talk - mostly about the children. It was because of them that I made the point of being home early whenever I could manage it. Rebecca was gaining far too much influence with them and I was beginning to feel shut out - so I decided to do something about it and make a point of being home in time to put them to bed.

On that particular afternoon - do you know, Michael, I don't even know how long ago it was? On that afternoon, Rebecca arrived as usual and went through her ritual. She was a little more talkative than usual and whilst I sipped my tea, she chattered on about something the children had done earlier in the day. I complained of feeling a little dizzy and she just sat and watched me until everything went out of focus and I passed out.

When I regained consciousness, I was in a bedroom, laying on the bed. I have no idea of how I got there. It was a strange room and I soon found that I was locked in. When I tried the windows, I found that they were locked shut and that they looked out over countryside I didn't recognise. It was then that I started to panic."

Michael took her hand again and stroked it.

"Then, what happened?"

"I was left alone until it grew quite dark. I thought of all manner of things to get out of the room. I shouted at the door but no one answered. I even thought of smashing the windows and climbing down the outside, but then I realised that it wasn't the ground floor and there was no balcony. I didn't know where I was. I had no idea who was keeping me locked away - except that Rebecca was somehow involved. I sat down and started to try to piece things together. The best I could conclude was that someone had taken

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the trouble to move me from the estate to another location, therefore, they wanted to keep me alive. It was small comfort!"

She paused once again.

"Deborah opened the door about two hours later. David Steinbecker stood behind her. I knew it was useless to try to fight my way out. David didn't look all that happy about the situation, but Deborah was her usual vitriolic self. She was so self-assured and arrogant, I felt like clawing her eyes out!"

"What did she have to say."

"She said that my time was over. She made no attempt to hide the fact that she and Rebecca were working together. She gloated over the fact that I would never see my children again. Rebecca had them and she would control them. Gideon would take his rightful place as the head of the Steinbecker Clan and Deborah would have her place of honour."

"She actually involved Gideon?"

"If we can take what she said as being accurate."

"Which raises the question whether Gideon knew what was happening."

"I wouldn't doubt for a moment that he was involved. Both of them have always hated me for 'entrapping' their father. They have always considered Rebecca to be their second mother. When Judith died, it was Rebecca who should have been Marcus's second wife - not some upstart girl cousin!"

Michael drew her close to him. He asked carefully.

"Do you think it possible that they would be involved in the death of their own father?"

She stared into his eyes.

"What are you asking, Michael?"

"Could Deborah and Gideon have had a hand in the explosion which wrecked the suborbiter?"

She shook her head slowly and whispered.

"Surely not, Michael. I don't think either of them could be that cold blooded."

"I have something to tell you, Leah."

He detailed the sequence of events which had led to her liberation. He paused before he came to the hardest part.

"So, you see, what you told me about Rebecca lacing your tea with something and then the involvement of Deborah, goes to confirm what we deduced. We even saw the connection with David - but about Gideon we could not be sure. It must have been David who carried you away from the estate and then stopped the Pod so that Rebecca could take your place. She travelled to the Terminal and then to the city centre and from there, she returned to the estate. In the meantime, David and Deborah brought you here to Gazera."

She looked into his eyes.

"There's something you haven't told me, Michael."

"Rebecca is dead, Leah!"

"Dead! How?"

"She tried to kill us all - the children included, by planting a bomb in our luggage. Simon made sure that it was left behind in the house. It exploded - and Rebecca must have been caught in the blast. Perhaps it was for the best. It would only have been a matter of time before someone would have arrested her. You must realise, Leah - if she could cold-bloodedly plant

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a bomb in our luggage - with no thought of the consequences for the children - she would not have second thoughts about placing a bomb in Marcus's luggage, which exploded when the suborbiter reached its maximum height."

The horror on her face was obvious, she started to sob and he cradled her in his arms. The release of grief had been a long time coming. He murmured.

"I'm so sorry, Leah. Your lovely house has gone. It quickly became a fireball. All the treasures, all the memories - they're all gone."

Her voice was surprisingly steady when she answered.

"I never want to go back there again, Michael. I never want to go back to Salem - or to a family who never really accepted me. I want to go to my home in Jerusalem with my children!"

"And so you shall, Leah. You can depend on it."

"You asked me if I thought Gideon and Deborah had a hand in their father's death - I honestly don't know - but I hope not. I wouldn't want anyone to have such a crime on their conscience, or think that they would have to account for it before the Throne of God."

Michael had Deborah brought to him before the evening was over. He was alone when she was escorted into the room. He didn't offer her the courtesy of standing when she entered, nor did he offer her a seat. He lounged back and stared at her steadily without saying anything. She returned his stare was surprising self-assurance. Her tone was loaded with mockery when she broke the silence.

"If the great Administrator has nothing better to do with his time than to look me over, perhaps he will excuse me if I return to my - cell."

"You will be returned to your - cell - when I have satisfied my curiosity. Just at the moment, I am wondering whether it might be worthwhile to open an investigation into the death of your mother, thirty years ago! After all, if you could be part of a conspiracy to murder your own father - why not your mother also?"

"What an arrogant man you are, Michael ben Levi! You imagine that you have enough power to do anything you please. You think you have won. You have no more than fifty men guarding this villa and you imagine that you are secure because they were strong enough to overwhelm a woman, half a man and a couple of servants. I would watch your over confidence if I were you. The situation could very quickly alter!"

"Thank you for the warning - so, you are expecting reinforcements from your allies? Who do you expect to rally to your assistance - your dear brother Gideon, perhaps? I can assure you, he is under close surveillance. Or perhaps your dear Rebecca?"

"Neither, it so happens! I suppose you have arrested Rebecca? It would be the least I would expect from our all powerful Administrator."

"You are quite wrong - Rebecca escaped arrest."

Her face flushed in triumph.

"Rebecca was always a step ahead of you all. I knew she would escape - you will never catch her!"

"You are quite correct - we will never arrest Rebecca and she will never be brought to account for her crimes - that is, not here. I can see that someone has neglected to tell you - Rebecca is dead, she blew herself apart playing with one of those devices which she planted on the suborbiter in which your father was travelling. She had hoped she could kill me and the

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children - and those travelling with us - but she miscalculated. I think you would agree, that was very careless of her."

Deborah had gone deathly pale and she swayed slightly. He left her standing in the centre of the floor.

"So, my question is this - were you in conspiracy with Rebecca to cause the death of your father, just as you were in conspiracy with her to kidnap his wife? I'll add another - Did Rebecca engineer the death of Judith, your mother, and were you also involved - you and your brother, Gideon?"

His stare was relentless. She whispered.

"I do not believe one word of what you have just said!"

"It is of no interest to me whether you believe me or not - the facts will speak for themselves. My interest is to find out the extent of your complicity in these crimes - your's and your brother's."

"I will tell you nothing! Absolutely nothing!"

"I would hardly expect you to do so - but you will remain under my personal supervision until you decide to open your mouth."

There was a return of the former fire.

"I wouldn't be so sure, Michael ben Levi - I wouldn't be so sure!"

He summoned the guard to take her away. She stalked out of the room as if she was a reigning monarch concluding an audience with an underling. He began to wonder if there was a streak of insanity in the genes of that particular branch of the Steinbecker family and then he remembered - she was only remotely related to the dead Rebecca. He called for David Steinbecker to be brought to him. Deborah's fellow conspirator was led into the room. He looked as if he barely had control of his limbs. Michael eyed him with something approaching compassion and gestured to a chair. The young man sat on the edge and stared into the eyes of his interrogator.

"I have one question I want you to answer, David. Was it you who planted the bomb on Marcus's suborbiter - or did Rebecca put it in his luggage."

His eyes widened.

"I would never do that to Marcus - never. My aunt - it was my aunt."

"I have to tell you that your aunt is dead, David - she planted a similar device and it exploded in the wrong place."

There was no particular reaction, Michael wondered if the information had sunk in. The response was quite flat and unemotional.

"She made me do everything. I was too afraid of her to refuse. I had nothing to do with Marcus's death - I swear it! She made me carry Leah to the Pod after she drugged her - and then I stopped along the way and Deborah took her place. Later, I picked up Deborah and we brought Leah here. But - I swear - I would never have let anyone hurt her! You must believe that!"

Michael's response was almost gentle.

"And just how do you think you could have stopped them, David?"

The young man stared at him and then dropped his eyes.

"I have one more question - Did you get your orders from Deborah, Rebecca - or Gideon?"

"Gideon? I never had any orders from Gideon. Rebecca and Deborah worked together."

"Are you quite sure that there was no one else involved?"

David hesitated. Michael prompted him.

"It will go better for you if you hold nothing back."

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"I think there was someone else. Deborah had a few calls here - I don't know who they were from."

"When was the last of them?"

"About ten minutes before your men arrived. Deborah got excited and we were about to take Leah from her room - I don't know why - when the door was kicked in and we were confronted by a mob of your security men."

Michael kept his face impassive - it had been a near thing. Simon had confirmed that Rebecca had made the call - it was the others which interested him.

"Tell me - did you overhear any of the other conversations?"

"No - Deborah always took them privately. I only ever heard her voice."

"Perhaps they were calls from Gideon."

There was a tremor of animation on David's face. He had become more relaxed, now that he found that he was not about to have his fingernails torn out.

"I don't think they would have been calls from Gideon."

Michael stretched his legs, his next question was almost languid.

"Why not?"

David's lips twitched, it was almost a smile.

"I told you - I heard her voice - a sister doesn't talk like that to her brother!"

Michael raised his eyebrows.

"You're suggesting that she might have been talking to her lover?"

David's expression clammed shut.

"I'm not saying anything else!"

Michael nodded and touched the control. The guard returned and escorted David from the room. Michael contemplated his toes and then he reached for his communicator. Simon answered the call.

"Simon, we have to be ready for visitors and I don't know how long we have before they arrive. I think reinforcements are called for - and the only ones upon whom we can rely will be from Jerusalem. I want them here by every available suborbiter, within three hours - and Simon, pray that our visitors don't arrive before them!"

During the next two hours, he worked feverishly to prepare for the landing of the cumbersome suborbiters. Theoretically, they were supposed to be capable of landing at any reasonable point on the earth's surface - but that was theory and depended on the definition of the word 'reasonable'. Deborah's estate was equipped to handle Pods and perhaps, small Shuttles. Suborbiters were a different kettle of fish. He did all that he could and had to admit that it might not be adequate.

He also established a sensor net to pick up any incoming traffic. During the two hours of preparation, there had been repeated attempts to establish contact through incoming calls. Various channels had been tried before the attempts had ceased. Michael was well aware that the news of the disaster at the Steinbecker estate had, by that time, travelled all over the Home Provinces and probably, to the more distant Provinces of the Far East Administration Area. There could be no doubt that Deborah's allies would be in full possession of the facts and would have realised that their well laid plans had gone seriously wrong. Now, would be the time for decisive action, or all would be lost.

Shortly after the two hours had elapsed, the sensors picked up a fleet

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of Pods coming in low from several directions. They were quickly identified as being those capable of carrying at least a six passengers and crew. Michael looked at the sensor panel and it was painfully obvious that his group of fifty security guards would be hopelessly outnumbered by the forces being directed against him. He watched until they were within twenty-five kilometres. It would be a matter of minutes before they descended around the house.

Leah was inclined to be argumentative when he ordered her and the children to the cellars.

"I have no time to argue, Leah! Do as I say, or I'll have you carried there!"

He waited for the first group of Pods to land. He ordered the main entrance doors to be opened and fully illuminated. He positioned a few men at strategical points and then prepared himself to bluff out the time remaining until his reinforcements could arrive. He sat sprawled in the easy chair in the main reception room, in front of a blazing fire. He looked up languidly when his visitor marched into the room.

"My dear, brother Weber! How pleasant of you to pay me a surprise visit!"

19.

Kurt Weber glared at the reclining figure of his Administrator and decided that this was as good a time as any to take him apart. However, caution dictated that he would be advised to subdue the desire, retribution would come soon enough and he hadn't completely assessed the degree of opposition ranged against him. There were nine Pods on the ground, apart from those which belonged to the household. His mathematics projected that no more than sixty men were ranged against his three hundred.

As an offset to his numerical superiority, there was something in the attitude of Michael ben Levi which urged caution. The man was altogether too confident, perhaps he was over confident. Kurt Weber elected to tread the path of diplomacy for a few more minutes. He growled a response.

"Greetings, Michael ben Levi. I am surprised to find you here."

Michael's smile broadened. He indicated a chair.

"Make yourself comfortable after your long journey."

Weber clenched his jaw and reined in his rage. The man was trying to provoke him. Michael continued.

"But, I was forgetting - what we call a long journey in my part of the world, is nothing more than an afternoon outing here! I suppose you come here quite often?"

"Why would you suppose that?"

Michael eyed the militant jaw and smiled gently.

"Deborah Steinbecker is a fine looking woman - I admire your good taste!"

Weber stared at him without smiling.

"Where is our hostess?"

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Michael leaned forward earnestly.

"I feel very guilty! I imagine she must be very busy organising for her unexpected guests. I've hardly spoken to her since I arrived."

Weber leaned forward.

"And I must talk to her urgently - No doubt you are aware that I have been trying to open communications for the past two hours?"

Michael's eyebrows arched.

"I wasn't told that you were trying to get through! There's been a lot of incoming traffic - especially from Salem - perhaps, their priority overrode yours!"

"No doubt it did, brother ben Levi!"

"I'm sure you will understand why the channels were tied up, when I tell you that an urgent situation has arisen in Salem."

Weber looked uncertain for the first time.

"I suspected something was going on. There's a communications blackout there too - perhaps you can explain why a man with my responsibilities is unable to access the Administration Secretariat?"

Michael replied smoothly.

"It was purely for reasons of security, brother Weber. As I recall, it was you who warned me recently that there is a great deal of civilian unrest over the disappearance of Leah Steinbecker. The events which have taken place in and around Salem have confirmed your warning. When I tell you that the Steinbecker estate suffered a bomb attack and sadly, Rebecca Steinbecker lost her life, you will appreciate why it has been necessary to institute emergency measures and block all communications in and out of the city!"

Weber had half risen from his seat, he sat down again heavily.

"Rebecca is dead?"

"I hadn't realised that you knew her very well, brother Weber. I should have been more tactful in breaking the news!"

"Does Deborah know?"

"It was my sad task to tell her."

Weber had made a valiant effort to recover his equilibrium, his gaze was unwavering.

"I must insist on talking to her!"

"But of course! I hope I didn't give you the impression that you shouldn't, brother Weber? - I can only assume that she's with Leah - "

They both rose and stood toe to toe.

"I have finished with word games, ben Levi!"

Michael nodded.

"I thought you would soon get tired of the charade! Your accomplices are under arrest, Weber - and so are you - for complicity in the murder of Marcus Steinbecker and for the unlawful detention of Leah Steinbecker!"

Weber's face relaxed into a smile - it wasn't altogether a pleasant display.

"That would be an interesting trick if you can pull it off, Administrator!"

"Simon! - Ah! There you are! You can have the pleasure of escorting brother Weber into detention."

Simon emerged from a side room, together with a squad of Michael's personal security men. The smile on Weber's face developed into a sneer.

"I thought you were a clever man, ben Levi. When I give the word - or if I fail to reappear within ten minutes, action will be taken by three hundred

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men surrounding this house. I remind you - you have about fifty to defend you. It will be only a matter of time before the situation is reversed. I suggest to you that it would be more sensible to accept my - hospitality - before it comes to bloodshed!"

Michael shook his head slowly.

"It wouldn't matter if you had three thousand men surrounding this house. My future is already mapped out for me - and it is not to be a prisoner in the hands of Kurt Weber - or to be at his disposal. You can't fight destiny and you can't fight against the forces who surround us. Your three hundred men are already surrounded by an uncountable number. I've already sent to Jerusalem for reinforcements, but I suggest to you that they won't be needed. I further suggest you think long and hard about who it is that you are trying to fight and how impossible it will be for you to win in such a battle!"

Weber glared back at him and Michael's eyes didn't waver. The big man's face was a shade more pale.

"We'll see who comes out on top, ben Levi!"

Michael gestured to the window.

"If you feel so confident, go and make your signal to your men. I guarantee that it will provoke a response you couldn't imagine!"

Weber's answer was derisive.

"I suppose you're trying to tell me that you have the backing of the Heavenly Host and that we are surrounded by some mythical uncountable multitude?"

Michael inclined his head in agreement.

"If you doubt it - put it to the test! Before you do, remember this: I was nominated by our Kingly Priest to be the Administrator of this region. It places me in a position of authority within the Kingdom governed by the Lord and his Firstlings. If you dispute with me, you dispute with them. Think well before you decide on your course of action."

Kurt Weber snarled.

"I can't see much evidence of this Kingdom of Peace - or of its rulers. It's over, ben Levi! Whatever it was that we lived through for a thousand years, is at an end. Now, we are under another regime. A regime of starvation and deprivation - with not much evidence of peace and prosperity. Even you will have to agree with that. Every man is his own authority - if others ever had authority over us, they have abdicated their rights when they allowed our pastures to become icefields or deserts and our people to starve in their millions.

No one seems to want to give the answer to the question which is on everyone's lips: 'What has happened to the teaching that there is a loving God who has only thoughts of peace towards us?' Don't talk to me about unseen forces standing ready to defend you, ben Levi - and don't try to frighten me with old wife's tales of impending doom!"

"We can thank the God you seem ready to doubt that your question isn't on every one's lips, Weber. It provides your answer and explains why the current conditions are being allowed. We have been taught that the majority of mankind asked a similar question in the time of the Apostles - there was death and famine then, just before the First Resurrection - but the opinions of men didn't alter what eventually took place.

I will tell you again! Go ahead! You sound so very sure - make your signal and take the consequences!"

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Weber walked to the open window and Michael gestured to Simon and the guards to allow him access. He was totally committed to the fact that the outcome no longer rested in his hands. If Weber activated his waiting forces or if he did not, it would make no difference to the ultimate commission Michael had received, which would place him on the Plain of Esdraelon, facing one who would set up his pavilion between the sea and the Camp of the Saints.

Michael had resumed his seat. Simon and the guards stood motionless, watching Weber standing at the window opening. They were like figures in a tableau. There was a peculiar sense of unreality, as if they were somehow separated in time and space from all the other events which were taking place around them. Michael stared at Weber's back and waited to see whether he would raise his hand, or whether he would shout some command. He realised that he didn't know what to expect, except that there was some sort of prearranged signal.

Outside, the three hundred men who had accompanied their leader for a show down with the Administrator from Jerusalem, stood tense and waiting for the signal. The fifty men whose task it was to defend Michael and his party readied themselves for hostilities. One or two searched the night sky for the first sign of the reinforcements which had been promised from their distant base. There was no movement amongst the stars and their tension grew when they realised that they were outnumbered six to one and a few seconds was all that remained before battle was joined.

Weber stood totally motionless in the window. He stared into the night for quite a long time. His hand remained at his side and his mouth was closed in a thin, bitter line. Eventually, he turned and faced into the room again. He glared into Michael's face.

"You win, ben Levi."

Michael stared back and nodded slowly.

"It was inevitable, brother Kurt. It was predictable that I couldn't be allowed to lose this battle!"

He gestured to Simon and the guard, who grouped themselves around the big man.

"Escort him to the front steps - there, he will instruct his men to give you no trouble."

"And if they do - Give trouble, I mean?"

"They won't!"

After a few minutes, Simon returned. He looked jubilant.

"They surrendered like lambs - they could have easily overwhelmed us!"

"No, they couldn't - we were too many!"

Simon looked out of the window.

"I wonder what he saw out there?"

"Ask him."

"I did - he didn't answer. Did you see something?"

"I saw what you saw, nothing more - "

"But, there was something there - you said - "

"I said nothing, Simon. Weber came to his own conclusions."

Simon changed the subject. He knew from a long relationship, when his boss was not inclined to elaborate, there was nothing to be gained by pursuing a subject.

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"What's going to happen now, Michael? It seems that both of the Home Provinces are in turmoil and we could be in for a period of civil disorder - especially when word gets out that Weber has been arrested."

"It will rather depend what gets out, Simon. We must pull no punches. Weber's complicity in the abduction of Leah and the suspicions we have of his involvement in the death of Marcus, have to be clearly stated. I want you to prepare a statement of all the known facts and emphasise that Kurt Weber stepped down voluntarily, so that the accusations could be investigated. Make it clear that he placed himself at my disposal when requested."

They were interrupted by a low rumble which gathered in intensity. The building resonated with the pulse of massive engines. The sky was filled with noise. Michael rolled his eyes upward.

"Better late than never, I suppose! Never mind, we will have need of our Jerusalem militia before we're finished with the Far Eastern Administration Home Provinces!"

The next few hours were busy. Half of the reinforcing militia were despatched again to the Gazera capital. Its garrison were totally disorganised and unprepared to offer even token resistance against squads of determined men, wearing the strange insignia of the Jerusalem militia, who calmly marched into strategic places and informed them that they were now under the direct orders of the Administrator. In former times, it would have been described as a bloodless coup - it would have been a matter of extreme regret if it had proved to be otherwise.

A small detachment was retained at Deborah's villa, to reinforce the slender forces who had rescued Leah. The rest were despatched on a similar mission to Salem. Once again, there was no resistance when the offices of the Administration Secretariat were secured, together with the Terminal and the Communications Centre.

Michael was able to snatch a few hours sleep before the scheduled meeting he had arranged early the next morning. He was glad to see that the others looked as weary as he felt. Leah, Simon and Luke sat with him in a rough circle and waited for Michael to open the proceedings.

"I'm glad to report that our priority to secure critical objectives, is going according to plan."

Leah interjected.

"Just what does that mean, Michael? You sound like a military commander."

"That isn't surprising! It was and is a military operation! How else would you expect me to sound?"

He decided that she looked a great deal better than when he had last seen her despite the obvious tiredness. She was still pale but the sparkle had returned.

"Why not tell us in plain language what's happening!"

"Remind me to search the Scriptures for a suitable text about a nagging woman!"

"Perhaps, it's close to the one in Jude about those who speak with big words instead of plain language!"

Luke leaned forward.

"Could I make the suggestion that you delay your marital dog-fights until a later date?"

He earned himself a united glare, which he returned calmly. Michael

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continued.

"The Gazera capital has been secured and so have essential offices and facilities. In Salem, it's the same story. By this time, the citizens of the Far Eastern Administration Region are hearing about the events which have prompted me to make these moves. They will know about the arrest of Kurt Weber and Deborah and the charges which they are facing. We will have to wait for the reaction. After that, we will decide whether it's time to move on to the next phase of our plan."

Leah interjected again.

"I didn't know - we - had one."

"All right! My plan! If these arrests cause an uprising, it might be necessary to bring in more of the Jerusalem militia."

"You can't hold down an entire population with a flood of foreign troops!"

"I have no intention of trying to do that - neither have I the intention of allowing supporters of Kurt Weber or Deborah to gain the upper hand."

"Kurt Weber has a lot of followers in this area, Michael. I have the feeling that they aren't going to be too happy about the arrest of their favourite son."

"That's to be expected - What about Salem? How much support do you think Deborah has?"

"I would have thought, very little - unless it's to be found amongst the Steinbecker Clan. Deborah has always shown a good deal of arrogance and it hasn't endeared her to most people - related or otherwise. I suppose the fact that she was Marcus's daughter might have counted for her - but that was before she was accused of complicity in his death. I think you'll find that the average citizen will be sublimely indifferent to her arrest - so long as he has food in his belly and the comforts of life."

"What will be the reaction of the other regional stewards - for instance, Ambrose Suosin?"

"Ambrose has his hands full trying to cope with the conditions in Mongolia - There was little empathy between him and Kurt Weber. I wouldn't call them rivals, but they tended to walk their own paths. Similarly, the other regional stewards have their own problems and I doubt if there will be anything other than a positive reaction to the news that someone stands accused of Marcus's murder."

"So - the one area of concern appears to Gazera Province - Kurt Weber's power base - and possibly, a splitting of the Steinbecker Clan, for and against Deborah?"

"Don't forget Gideon - and Michael, don't under estimate him, he can be a very nasty individual."

"I can assure you, I have no intention of forgetting Gideon Steinbecker. If he shows his nose in Salem, he can expect to be interrogated about his knowledge of your abduction."

Simon had been listening silently, now he cleared his throat.

"So, Michael - What happens now?"

Michael stared at the floor.

"We need someone to look after the Gazera Province - someone with administrative skills."

He looked up and stared pointedly at Simon.

"Well, my friend - I think you've just volunteered! I have need of a

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reliable man to take over from Kurt Weber. I hope you will accept. I will leave you the militia and there will be immediate reinforcements if they should be required. What do you say?"

Simon had flushed slightly.

"I don't have any particular ambitions to do anything other than what I am doing - but if you believe it to be essential, I'll do as you wish."

"Good man!"

Leah eyed the two men, she knew that a close bond existed between them. Michael trusted Simon, as he trusted few other men. Michael turned to her.

"That leaves us with the problem of Salem - "

"I've already told you, Michael - I don't want to set foot in the place again. I'm going to Jerusalem with my children."

"Have you any suggestions?"

"None! I wouldn't trust any one in the Secretariat, whether they were called Steinbecker or not!"

Michael shrugged.

"Then, I will have to find someone from Jerusalem and leave them a similar contingent of the militia - and hope the rampaging Steinbeckers can be held in check!"

Leah murmured.

"When I think of Marcus, Father Joel and Grandfather Carl before him, I feel like weeping. Carl could never have foreseen that he would be the ancestor of a group of people who could no longer be trusted because they carried his name, and Joel was always so proud of his heritage. Both of them tried to hammer home the prime teaching of the Kingdom: Beware of the Second Death. They kept alive the site of the Memorial, not for the sake of their own memories but as a constant reminder for the future generations. Now, look at what they've become!"

"Leah, no one can guarantee how their children will turn out. To give them credit, Carl and Joel and Marcus for that matter, did have some successes. Not every Steinbecker is a Rebecca, a David, or a Deborah - or a Gideon. We have our Leah as well."

He placed his hand over hers and stared into her eyes. Simon coughed diplomatically.

"If there's nothing else, boss? I want to keep an eye on what's coming in through Communications."

Michael nodded. Luke stood also, Michael stopped him.

"Stay a while, brother Luke. I think this is the right time to ask you what your real motives were, when you approached me at the Salem Terminal!"

Luke returned to his chair slowly.

"My real motives? Do I necessarily have a hidden agenda?"

"I think you do - so, what's the story?"

Luke smiled slightly.

"I was told that you were a sharp man, brother ben Levi. I suppose I couldn't fob you off with the suggestion that all I wanted to do was to help to recover our sister Leah? I take it that you wouldn't believe it."

"You take it correctly, brother Belin."

"It's really a lot more simple than that - perhaps, you won't believe that either?"

"Try me!"

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"I was one of Marcus Steinbecker's special operatives!"

Michael looked across to Leah. She was wide eyed, she shrugged in bewilderment.

"And what is a Marcus Steinbecker special operative, brother Belin?"

"Someone who was supposed to prevent what happened to him. The problem remains that I was watching in the wrong place - and I failed!"

20.

It took another seven days before Michael felt confident enough to leave the Far Eastern Administration Region and return to Jerusalem. During those seven days, there had been hastily convened holo-conferences with some of his senior men. For the most part, they were those advisors he had inherited from Asher. He knew he had a rock solid corp. of reliable men upon whom he could call to do the most difficult tasks. There was no doubt that whoever inherited the Secretariat in Salem, would have an extremely hostile ride and would require considerable talent.

The abdication of Leah and her reason for leaving the city to return to Jerusalem, had placed the Steinbecker Clan on the defensive. Privileges which their name had earned and which they had enjoyed for nearly a thousand years, were now under threat. Whoever took over from Leah, would be calculated to ask a lot of questions and veto a good number of jealously guarded arrangements. It wasn't that any of them were particularly improper - but there was no actual reason why certain people should be favoured over others. It was a product of habit, perhaps even of expediency and in the calm waters of the Kingdom, questions had never been raised. It had been a non-issue.

Michael chose an older man, one who was well versed in the ways of the bureaucrats of Asher's Administration. In a private holo-conference, he told him exactly what sort of reaction he could expect and that he could anticipate a great deal of hostility. Lazarus Cohen was a shrewd man. He was small and wiry with a head which seemed out of proportion to his body. His features were extremely Jewish. He stared Michael straight in the eye and smiled slowly.

"I served Asher for a long time, Michael - Do you remember when you first came to his house? You were a very young fellow - no more than five or six years old. On that occasion, as I remember, you tipped a plate of hot vegetables into my lap at the meal table. I can tell you, you made my eyes water! I think what you've just asked me to do, rates at about the same mark on the discomfort scale! It sounds a painful exercise - but if that's what you want, I'll do it!"

Michael smiled back, he liked the little man.

"Take plenty of handkerchiefs with you!"

Lazarus looked up sharply.

"For your watering eyes, Lazarus!"

Simon had already left for the Gazera capital. The parting had been deliberately low key - underplayed. Michael had grown used to having Simon around. They had been together for a long time and the relationship between them had long since slipped from that of employer and employee into that of

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an easy intimacy of true friendship. They had shaken hands awkwardly and taken refuge in formality - a formality which had long since been abandoned. When the Pod sped on its way northward, Michael was conscious of feeling a loss - he was also confronted with whom he could call upon to replace him - after a long deliberation, he decided upon Luke Belin.

The big man's eyes widened when the proposition was put to him. His objections were blunt.

"I don't know the first thing about being a private secretary to anyone - let alone to an Administrator!"

"I know that - I don't need someone who shuffles communiqués around a desk. I need someone upon whom I can rely to watch my back, day and night. Wasn't that what you were doing for Marcus Steinbecker?"

Luke stared at him steadily.

"I didn't do Marcus much good - I don't come highly recommended from my previous employer!"

"I'm not asking for recommendations - I make my own judgements!"

"Then - brother ben Levi - I hope your judgement doesn't prove fatal!"

"Will you take the job, or not?"

Luke shrugged and nodded.

"You've got yourself a new gopher, brother Michael!"

On the evening before their departure for Jerusalem, Michael relaxed and thought over the arrangements he had put in place. Lazarus had moved quickly and was already installed in the Salem Secretariat. Simon had similarly taken over the reins in the Gazera capital. There was no sign of resistance or reaction from those who suddenly found themselves the subjects of new overlords. Michael had the impression of a waiting game.

During the afternoon, a communiqué had arrived concerning the movements of Gideon Steinbecker. It seemed that he was heading for Jerusalem. It was yet another pressing reason why Michael knew he had to return to his centre of operations.

He was still faced with the decision as to how he was going to deal with the three conspirators. Deborah, David and Kurt Weber remained in custody at the villa. In some undefinable way, he could feel their presence in the building. It was a constant reminder that they were in his hands and that he would have the ultimate decision over their fate. They were a problem which would not go away, but he prevaricated.

He made the excuse to himself that he still needed to investigate the part that Gideon had had to play. For this reason, he took no steps to arrange a trial. There was another factor, during the Thousand years, there had never been the occasion to hold a trial - there was no body of precedent to instruct him how he was going to deal with the logistics of trying three people - and there was no rule of law he could take as an example if they were to be found guilty of the crime of murder - unless it was the Law of Moses.

On this last evening at Deborah's villa, he made the decision to transfer the three prisoners to Jerusalem. It seemed the better of the three options. He saw no reason to move them to the Gazera capital, or to Salem. Simon and Lazarus had enough problems without adding the additional burden of a focal point for revolt and the attempted release of the conspirators. Jerusalem seemed the logical place. It was also a pointed reminder that the responsibility was his.

There was another problem - Leah! He had been almost submerged in

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work in the time between her release on the first evening, until that moment. The departure of Simon and Michael's attempts to initiate Luke into his new duties, had added considerably to his work load. The net result had been that he had hardly had time to take the woman he loved to one side and talk over what was going to happen in the future.

It was obvious that her intentions were to go to Jerusalem, but it was by no means a foregone conclusion that they would be together. Leah had kept out of his way. On the surface, she might have been giving him room to make the arrangements which had taken up so much of his time, but the result was the creation of distance, as if she was trying to avoid being alone with him. It was something which required immediate and decisive action. He rose to his feet and wandered through the house. He tracked her down eventually and stood watching in the doorway of the children's room.

They were just asleep and she knelt by their beds and looked at them for a while. When she got up and turned, her hands jerked up defensively, when she saw him watching her. He stepped aside as she closed the door of the room.

"You frightened me, Michael!"

"I'm sorry - I didn't want to disturb you or the children."

"I find I'm very nervous since - since the business with Rebecca."

He took her shoulders. He felt the tension, but she didn't try to pull away - on the other hand, she didn't move any closer.

"We leave for Jerusalem tomorrow."

"I know - I'll be glad to leave this place."

"I'm sorry I kept you here so long, it can't hold any good memories."

"I didn't mean this house - I meant the Far East. My place is in Jerusalem - I've always felt it, I never gave up my home there - something stopped me from doing so."

"Are you quite sure you don't want to go back to Salem before we leave?"

"Especially not to Salem! I associate Salem with treachery and people conspiring to kill their cousin and to hold me against my will."

"It also has a lot of memories of happier days, Leah - with Marcus - and then, your children were born there."

Her response was sharp.

"They can go back one day! Not me! I will never set foot there again - "

"Just as you like, Leah - it's your decision. I thought you should know - Gideon appears to be travelling towards Jerusalem."

"Why?"

"I intend to find out - I have a few questions to ask Gideon Steinbecker!"

"I hope you don't want me to meet him, Michael! I want nothing to do with him - or with Deborah."

Michael nodded and placed his arm around her shoulders. He led her slowly along the corridor to the reception room.

"I still haven't decided what to do with them, Leah. They must be called to account for what they've done - and there must be some sort of punishment - but I don't know how to go about it."

"An eye for an eye!"

He looked at her sharply.

"Is that what you really think? An eye for and eye?"

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"If they want to live outside of the rule of Grace, they must expect to be dealt with according to the rule of the Law!"

Michael sat her down in one of the chairs and pulled his closer so that he sat almost touching.

"Tell me - whom do you suggest to be the executioner? Firstly, who will be the Judge - who will make the decision of life and death?"

She gestured wearily.

"I don't know, Michael. Perhaps, it's this place - perhaps, it's Salem and the thought of Marcus taking off from the Terminal and then, the explosion which tore a hole in the thin skin of the ship. Do you think he choked and gasped for breath? Was it quick for him, Michael?"

She sobbed against his shoulder and he cradled her and rocked her like a child. He knew he couldn't put any pressure on her. She would return to Jerusalem with him and they would live in the same city, but he couldn't ask her to make a decision where he was concerned. She was so very close to a breakdown and only time and a change of locale could heal the trauma. Her sobs died away and she didn't try to pull away from him. She lay quietly in his arms in the darkness and stared into the fire. Eventually, he could hear that she had fallen asleep. He picked her up gently and she stirred and moaned but didn't waken. He carried her to her bedroom and placed her on the bed. He looked down at her and then covered her with some loose bedding.

They made ready to return to Jerusalem on one of the suborbitors which had brought the militia reinforcements. The landing of the huge ships had made an untidy mess of one of the cultivated fields which surrounded Deborah's home. Luke organised the loading of the three prisoners. Michael watched from one of the windows. Kurt Weber didn't give a backward glance to the house which had been the scene of many a liaison with the woman who strode arrogantly behind him. She did stare for a long moment at the building and Michael was sure that she saw him watching. David stumbled along, with his head bowed. He looked a broken man. Michael felt almost sorry for him - but he steeled himself against sentimentality. David was as guilty as the other two.

Once they were safely embarked and in the care of a respectable contingent of militia, Luke returned to the house.

"Did they give you any trouble."

Luke grinned.

"Only Madam Imperious, but I soon cut her down to size! We're ready when you are."

Leah and the children were ready. The youngsters were chattering excitedly about the forthcoming flight. Leah stared through the window at the suborbiter.

"I hate these things!"

Michael took her hand. He responded gently.

"Any other way would take too long. We want to arrive in Jerusalem before Gideon."

She nodded.

"When this flight is over, I never want to go on another suborbiter."

She sat beside him for the two hours of the journey. Her tension was almost palpable. Luke kept the children amused. Michael whispered.

"He has quite a talent with youngsters."

Leah nodded.

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"What do you know about him? Does he have a wife? Children? He's not as young as us. Does he have a history?"

"We all have a history! Call it what you like, Leah - intuition - or whatever else. I trust him. I know next to nothing about him, but I would put my life in his hands!"

"It doesn't pay to be too trusting, Michael - remember what happened to Marcus!"

They were met at the Salt Sea Terminal by a squad of militia and a dozen of Michael's advisers. There was a certain air of tension. One of the senior secretaries stepped forward to explain.

"We decided not to break security whilst you were in transit, brother Michael. Feodor Chernienko reports a sudden movement of the Malenski force towards the Baltic coast. He suggests that there is the probability of an imminent clash with the roving bands moving down from Scandia."

Michael absorbed the information. He took particular note of the term 'Malenski force'. He had gone out of his way to discourage the use of 'Gog' and 'Horde'. Despite a great deal of evidence to the contrary, he was still not totally convinced that there was an automatic equation between Georgi Malenski and his mob of refugees moving down from the Arctic and thence across the Urals, with the expected appearance of the biblical Gog.

"Thank you, Reuben. You were wise to be cautious. You say that Feodor reports a sudden movement. What does that imply, have they somehow speeded up their advance to the west? Did he give any information about the size of the Scandia groups?"

"It seems that Grigor Suskov's fleet of Pods and cargo transporters have been appropriated. The refugees are now strung out in a long line across northern Russia, between where they crossed the Urals and the Baltic coast. Malenski is thickening this band by airlifting his people and expanding out of pockets grouped around populated centres. He seems to have formed a kind of barrier to prevent the Scandia bands from moving further south, but some of his people have themselves turned south and are spreading towards the northern boundary of the Chernienko stewardship."

"I'd better talk to Feodor - Any news of Gideon Steinbecker?"

Reuben glanced at Leah, who had stood silently beside Michael.

"You may speak openly, Reuben. Leah can hear what you have to say about her stepson!"

Reuben's eyebrows lifted slightly.

"He was last reported leaving New Brasilia on a suborbiter bound for Potomac. It is due to arrive there in ten minutes."

Michael looked thoughtful.

"I wonder what he's trying to do - muster up support from Ruis Peres and Thaddeus Grant? I would be surprised if he gets much encouragement from Thaddeus - he and Marcus were allies on the Council - Ruis Peres is another matter. I can't forget the grilling to which he subjected Marcus over the matter of the Storage Directive. Keep a close eye on Gideon, Reuben, we don't want any surprises!"

By this time they were already on their way to the Judaeen Hills. Leah interjected.

"I hope you haven't forgotten that I have my own home, Michael."

He turned and smiled.

"I haven't forgotten - but I had hoped you had. Leah, your house needs

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putting into commission - it hasn't been lived in for years. You have two small children who are trying to pretend that they aren't tired, but not making a very good job of it! It would be sensible if you accept my offer of hospitality for a day or so - or are you in a particular and desperate hurry to get away from me?"

She flickered a little smile.

"I'm not desperate, nor am I in any particular hurry - thank you for the offer, Michael - just for a day or two."

She seemed so determined to keep up the barrier against him! Michael returned the smile. He would play it her way, he could only suppose that it was some sort of defence mechanism. She had lived through a great deal of betrayal.

They arrived at the old house where she had lived for so many decades. He watched her as she stepped out of the Pod. John and Rachael were on each hand, close to her. The exhaustion was very visible. Some of the older house staff took her under their wing. He was glad that he had insisted that she stayed with him.

There was no time to think about his personal relationships with Leah. The hastily convened holo-conference with Feodor was the first priority - even the activities of Gideon had to take second place. Feodor shimmered into life and joined him on the holo-pad. He looked agitated - but then, Feodor always displayed a great deal of vital energy.

"Thank God you're back, Michael!"

"How are you, Feodor - Do you have any particular reason for such emphatic thankfulness?"

"Gog is on the move - don't tell me you haven't been told!"

"I won't! I have been told that the Malenski force is moving across your northern boundary."

"That's only half of it! They're encroaching into Anatole Barenkov's stewardship!"

"I thought he was already having trouble with the Scandian bands."

"True! But now, Malenski is moving into the same territory - and there have already been pitched battles between them."

"Which must be relieving the pressure on Anatole, surely."

Feodor eyed him doubtfully.

"I hope you're not suggesting that Georgi Malenski is our ally - against the Scandian bands."

Michael shrugged.

"Why not! In the short term. I won't consider Georgi to be an aggressor until he actually crosses your northern perimeter, or until Anatole reports that his storehouses have been raided. In the meantime, I intend to tell him to open up his northern granaries and feed those who are hungry!"

Feodor shook his head vigorously.

"You're wrong, Michael! Appeasement will never buy peace. If you feed them once, they will demand more the second time. It will accelerate and more and more will be attracted to the hand-out and then they will take what they want by force. That's how it happened all over Siberia - ask Grigor Suskov!"

"I was reminded earlier today of the Storage Directive which Marcus received from a Firstling. In it, there was no provision for picking and choosing who was worthy to be fed in the time of need. The stores we have in

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our barns were provided by the special bounty of our Heavenly Father, who gave rich harvests, so that we could store for these conditions. Nowhere do I find a reference to restricting the stored food to provide for some of the population, whilst others are forced to scratch in the ground. We have vast reserves - especially from the Saharan Granaries - they are not reserved for the exclusive use of the citizens of the Central and North African Administration regions, but for all those who are still classified as the citizens of the Kingdom of Peace!"

Feodor rose in his chair and his image became distorted, so that it appeared to loom over Michael, who waited quietly until the Kharkov technicians coaxed his excitable friend to return to his seat. Feodor was very flushed.

"I'm sorry you don't see it that way, Feodor - but that is how it is going to be!"

Feodor appeared to be trying to swallow his retort but he didn't succeed.

"Then, brother Michael. I am beginning to think that I made the wrong decision when I asked you to accept my province as part of your Administration!"

Michael stared into the angry, flushed face for a long moment.

"I'm sorry you feel that way, Feodor. Try to convince me of another solution by answering these questions. Do you think you can stand alone against several million refugees and do you think you can close your storehouses against a hungry and desperate tide of human beings? What weapons will you use against starving women and children? Are you prepared to strike against the hungry hands stretched out towards you? Or do you think it would be better to try to regulate and control, so that all have equal and proper shares of what is available?"

## 21.

Pik Sedova pushed his face down into the collar of his fur jacket and tugged its hood down over his eyes. He stared out over the ice bound Gulf of Riga towards the hidden menace from the north. Already in the previous days, his men had had to fight off the onslaught of wave after desperate wave of starving men. The slaughter had been considerable on both sides. He turned his head and spat into a snow drift and narrowed his eyes against the blizzard. He hoped the sentries he had posted had keen senses. The Scandians could now be considered experts in dealing with the atrocious conditions. His men were not so expert. A keen pair of eyes and acute ears might spell the difference between survival and annihilation.

On the whole, he was satisfied with the progress his band of raw recruits was making. Georgi Malenski had given him the task of welding together a fighting force - although he might not yet be aware of it. Sedova grinned mirthlessly, showing yellow teeth. Georgi was a peculiar mixture of administrative and military genius and an almost childlike naiveté. Pik Sedova was quite content for the moment, to accept him as his leader. Georgi

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commanded a type of loyalty which was rare. Those whom he had led down from the delta of the Lena and those who had joined them along the way, held him in a kind of awe - almost reverence. It was a sentiment Pik Sedova couldn't fight against, but he could turn it to his own advantage.

The man who was whispered to be Gog, had entrusted the regulation of weapons into his keeping. He had also instructed him to train likely recruits so that they could be handled efficiently. It was an opportunity too good to be true for the man from Novaja Zemla and one which he had accepted with both hands. He had gone much further than his original brief, he had welded together a respectable army - one which Georgi Malenski appeared not to know existed.

On the surface, the decision to strike out across the open plains of northern Russia had been that of Georgi Malenski. In reality, Sedova had planted the suggestion in his casual way and left it with his venerated leader to gestate upon. Now, the broad thrust of their progress into Europe was established. A corridor one hundred kilometres across, had been established from the Urals to the Gulf of Riga and from each flank of that corridor, the refugees from Siberia were spreading out to the north and to the south.

In the direction he was facing, were the now frozen polders of the Gulf of Bothnia and if he shifted his eyes westward, the bleak expanse of the snow driven bed of the ancient Baltic Sea stretched along the north European plain to the flatlands bordering the Atlantic. Pik Sedova was well satisfied with his progress, but he was not a man to dwell on it. He knew how quickly his success could be reversed. He debated whether now was the time to carry the onslaught to the Scandians, to turn what had previously been a defensive stance into one where he could drive back the northern invaders into the frozen wastes from which they had come. Reluctantly, he decided against it. His supply lines were too precarious, at any time, along that hundred kilometre wide corridor, there could be an onslaught from a hitherto unsuspected band of northern invaders. Now, was not the time to carry the war into their territory.

He turned about and stared down towards the south, it was a softer target but he knew he would have to tread carefully. Georgi Malenski had entered into some sort of truce with the Barenkovs and Chernienko - and behind them stood Michael ben Levi. Sedova spat again, it was as much a reflection of his contempt, as indicative of the condition of his sinuses.

He returned to his shelter, it could hardly be described as a tent. It was no more than a stretch of hides sown roughly together and propped on fallen branches, which was braced against the direction of the prevailing wind. It offered little comfort and little privacy. It didn't worry him. Over the previous three years, he had grown used to living in extreme conditions. Until he had been driven out of his remote home country, he had sustained himself by hunting the small animals which had proliferated during the time of the Kingdom of Peace. He was not a man of sentiment, he was hungry and they were a source of food, it was the only consideration.

The few people who shared the wilderness of the New Land - Novaja Zemla, had given him the name he now used. Pik Sedova was the highest point on the island and especially since the climatic change, it was where he had ranged in search of food, until it had become a bleak place. It was therefore fitting that he had been named after it - he had also become a bleak and hostile individual, who had discarded the softer ways of the thousand

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years of comfort.

He took the bowl of thin gruel from the woman who shared his shelter and gave her no thanks. He wondered why he bothered to keep her near him. Their relationship was totally different to that which was shared between Georgi Malenski and Elena. Sedova knew Georgi's mate despised him, he also knew that she could see behind the facade of loyalty he professed to have for her husband. He glared into the gruel and promised himself that the time would come when she would wear a different expression on her pretty face!

There was a rush of feet close to the opening of the shelter. Sedova rose with his hand on his knife - it was one of his own men, but the approach showed that they were still novices. The man blurted out his message.

"The Scandians are attacking."

Sedova drew his knife free of its sheath and rose without a word and followed the messenger.

Two thousand kilometres to the east, Georgi Malenski prepared to follow the corridor to the west. The evidence of the progress being made to settle the great mob of refugees, was all around him. For the first time, the numbers within the main camp were depleting. There was a constant traffic of Cargo Transporters and Pods moving thousands of men, women and children to points along the corridor Pik Sedova had established. Georgi watched them as they boarded the ships, the look of hope had returned.

There still remained the matter of logistics - the feeding and housing of so many with the resources available. The north Russian plain was vast, but he asked himself if it was big enough to take the numbers pouring in and would the climatic conditions be clement enough to feed them in the future? His thoughts turned to the south. Feodor Chernienko stood across his path, flanked by the Barenkov cousins and behind them was Michael ben Levi. They collectively guarded more than enough resources for his displaced people.

His meeting with Michael and Feodor had only been a few days earlier, but already its clarity was fading in his mind. He found himself disputing that he had made some sort of commitment not to cross into their territory. He was sure nothing had been verbally agreed, although there might have been an implication that he would not swamp them with a flood of hungry men, women and children.

Elena watched him by the flickering light of the single flame which floated on a pool of dirty oil in a dish. The flame guttered and flickered with the impurity and sent a wisp of acrid smoke into the top of the thin structure. The shadows danced on his face and made it eerily mobile, so that at times, he looked as if he was grinning at some silent joke, or at others, that he was glaring ferociously into the dirt floor. These were the times when she felt suddenly afraid. It was as if the real person within Georgi Malenski was showing his face and the man she had loved and married and to whom she had born a son, was now someone totally different.

As she prepared the thin soup which was their monotonous, repetitive meal each evening, she had to acknowledge that the man she had once known had gone. This was someone different. She almost dropped the wooden spoon as he suddenly spoke.

"Tomorrow, we move forward, be sure to have everything ready early."

She ventured a question, half expecting not to be answered.

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"Do we travel far, Georgi?"

He looked up at her and she was surprised to see that his expression were almost gentle.

"No more walking for us, Elena - tomorrow we go by Pod. We go to Gorki, it's on the Volga - it's also about half way to where Pik Sedova has advanced."

She stiffened when the man's name was mentioned. She bit her tongue, it wasn't her place to question the trust Georgi was placing in that man, but she didn't trust him. She had seen behind his eyes, she knew he was waiting for something - for a moment when he would make his move - and she also knew that somehow, in those hidden thoughts, she was involved. The thought made her flesh crawl. Georgi continued without noticing the reaction.

"I have to catch up with him and find out what the situation really is on the Baltic coast. I don't get a lot of sense out of those who bring back the transporters."

"Perhaps, it is a good thing to go and see for yourself, Georgi."

He stared at her.

"I know you don't like him, Elena. I don't know why you've taken such a dislike. We've met rough and crude characters before this and you've accepted them for what they are. I find your sudden dislike of Pik Sedova hard to understand."

"I've accepted him for what he is, Georgi - He is an opportunist and I don't trust him - neither should you!"

It was the first time she had spoken her mind in months. He stared at her for a long moment.

"Perhaps I don't trust him, Elena - but I need him to make the push into Europe - I need his skills to combat the Scandians."

"Tell me, Georgi - Who are these Scandians? Are they a race from another planet, or are they as hungry and dispossessed as ourselves? Do we have the sole right to the storehouses? What gives us the right to fight them and to butcher them in the way that Sedova is doing?"

"We have no evidence of that, Elena. Sedova is clearing the way for us - that's all."

"You make him sound like a saint! Ask the women of the men who come back from the Baltic! You may not be getting any answers to your questions, but they tell their wives about your friend's methods!"

His face was grim.

"I said I was going to see for myself, Elena - now let's have an end to this tirade!"

She dared to say one more thing and knew she was pushing his tolerance to the limit.

"I want to say one more thing, Georgi - there is such a thing as guilt by association. If you accept and condone what he's doing, it makes you his accomplice!"

"I said enough! Give me my food."

They lay like strangers throughout that night, with their child between them. She knew he was awake and thinking, sometimes she wondered how he had the energy to get through the days, he slept so little. Eventually, she dozed off, but she was bone weary when she woke. Georgi's movement had been careful, but she was immediately alert. She watched him strip off the

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tattered tunic and wash in icy water. The flesh had melted from his body, he was little more than skin and bone - added to that was a driving force which was sometimes terrifying. She wanted to reach out and touch him but she held back her hand, she no longer dared to offer that simple act of comfort.

Georgi was soon surrounded by his inner circle of advisers, effectively, she was thrust into the background. She could claim very little of the life of this man, for most of the time she was an appendage. She helped Piotr to dress and then prepared for the dismantling of their shelter and was a little puzzled that there were no men loitering around waiting for her to get out of the way so that it could be done. Georgi looked in her direction.

"Leave everything here, someone else can use it. In Gorki, you will have somewhere else to live."

A little later, she led her son to the Pod, she looked back on the tattered tent and was surprised to feel a pang of regret. It was hardly holding together, but it had endured the terrible journey through the frozen Siberian wilderness and had been their only shelter and symbol of their home during those days of starvation. It had been the focal point of the mystical authority Georgi had held over his followers.

Leaving it seemed an omen that things would never again be the same. An indefinable feeling of terror made her stop short so that Piotr looked up at her in wonderment. She knew that from this time forward, there was going to be a transformation, not only in her standard of life, but in the nature and substance of her husband. Saying goodbye to the shelter, was like saying goodbye to Georgi Malenski.

The journey to Gorki was made in isolation. Georgi was immersed in conversations with his advisors. She could hear very little, but there seemed a great deal of disagreement. She hoped the subject was Pik Sedova and that someone would be able to talk some sense into her husband's stubborn head. Her feeling of distrust had grown since the conversation of the previous evening. The old expression seemed to apply in their relationship: 'He who sups with the devil should use a long spoon'. Georgi had said that he didn't trust him but that he needed him. Elena couldn't help wondering what the cost would be when Pik Sedova decided to submit his account for services rendered.

Elena and Piotr were entrusted into the care of people she didn't know, as soon as they reached Gorki. It was a substantial city. She found herself gaping at the buildings around her, as they rode into the city from the Terminal. The parting from Georgi had been almost perfunctory. It was nothing new, it was as if Georgi didn't dare to show any real emotion in case it would be construed as a sign of weakness before his devoted band of followers.

If the sights and sounds of the big city had impressed her during the transit from the Terminal, the structure into which they were led, made her stop in her tracks.

"There must be some mistake."

"Not so, sister Malenski."

One of the unknowns responded.

"These are the quarters considered appropriate for our leader and his family!"

She made one more attempt at protest.

"Did my husband agree to this?"

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"His advisors considered it appropriate, your husband was not troubled with the details - in view of the other demands on his time."

The small party of officials bowed and scraped out of her presence and she was left to contemplate the suite of rooms into which she had been deposited. Piotr was already running from one to the other, excitedly exploring the new dimensions. Elena shook her head in vehement disbelief. Georgi would never agree to it! She accepted the fact that nothing could be done until he returned and that there could be no changes in the short term.

Georgi had always insisted that his family should be treated no differently than those who camped around them. He had never set himself up as a leader with special privileges. The new arrangements contravened every sentiment he had ever expressed on the subject. She wandered around and touched fittings and appointments in a kind of wonderment. How quickly one forgot the luxuries of life. The journey from their home on the Lena, had taken no more than a few weeks, but in that time, the everyday privations had driven out thoughts of turning a tap for running water, or waving the hand across a control panel to illuminate a room or open a storage space.

These simple things were now a source of wonderment to her. The furnishings, chairs, recliners, beds - were soft to the touch. They moulded to the body and provided comfort. She found herself sitting on the end of a large bed and touching the softness, hardly aware of the tears streaming down her face and the look of wonderment on the face of her son, who stood watching her from the doorway.

Georgi Malenski had watched his wife and son being escorted from the Pod. He too, had been conscious of the restraint between them when they had parted. There was no doubt that Elena had drawn back from him. During the hours of the previous night and after the sharp discussion they had had on the subject of Pik Sedova, he had realised how silent she had become during the previous weeks. Her function as wife and mother had almost been mechanical, as if she considered herself part of the equipment provided for his use.

The spark of love which had been so bright between them, and which had fanned into passion briefly after his conference with Grigor Suskov, had once again receded. He knew that he was a great deal to blame, together with the desperate privations they had endured, but the final withdrawal had seemed to coincide with the advent of Pik Sedova into their lives. Elena had put up a great barrier and Georgi had neither the time or the energy to tear it down.

The Pod took him westward over the flat lands of the northern Russian plain. It had been on this territory, that the conquerors of old had faltered on their drives to the east. Armies from the west had ventured there and had been annihilated by the fierce winter conditions and extended supply lines which were constantly harried by their enemies. Now, his army was sweeping in the opposite direction and it was his task to ensure that their supply lines were kept open and that they did not fail.

He was almost in shock when he realised that for the first time he was beginning to see Pik Sedova and his men as an army of conquest. There had been a subtle change in his thoughts over the previous days - his refugees, his hungry and starving millions, had now become an armed force foraging for supplies as they pressed into new lands. He remembered Elena's words: 'Tell me, Georgi - Who are these Scandians? Are they a race from another

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planet, or are they as hungry and dispossessed as ourselves? Do we have the sole right to the storehouses? What gives us the right to fight them and to butcher them in the way that Sedova is doing?'

He remembered his answer: 'We have no evidence of that, Elena. Sedova is clearing the way for us - that's all.' It had been an evasion, perhaps he was trying to make an unlikely saint out of Pik Sedova. Another question came unbidden, a question which was always with him. In view of the changes he was allowing in the status of his refugees, was he also changing in some ungovernable way into the biblical monster, Gog? Was the establishment of an army under Pik Sedova another step on the path which would transform Georgi Malenski and bring him to the Plain of Esdraelon to face Michael?

Did he have a choice in the matter? Had the hooks already been placed in his jaws long ago, which were designed to turn him about and lead him from out of his northern lands against the people living in unfenced cities? By the time he reached the windswept and snow clad terrain close to the Baltic, his mood was sombre to the point of desolation. How could he fight against something which was preordained? All he could do was bow to the inevitable.

Pik Sedova waited for his leader at the side of the Pad which had been constructed to handle the inflow of new material for his expanding force. For the most part, they were new recruits who saw conflict as somehow exciting and glamorous. It didn't take long before they were disillusioned and by that time, it was too late to turn back or change their mind. No one was allowed to make a return trip to the more secure areas in the east. The new arrival was different, he would be one of the few to make the return journey. Pik Sedova knew that his coming would be a morale booster for his discouraged force. The appearance of their mystical leader in their midst could be manipulated to stir them into feats of courage they could not imagine.

Georgi Malenski descended slowly down the ramp. Pik Sedova waited patiently, he approved of the caution, the impact of the leader's arrival would be considerably diminished if he slipped and upended on his butt. He stepped forward and clasped his hand in greeting.

"Welcome, brother Georgi."

Malenski nodded, the bitter thoughts that had accompanied him for the last thousand kilometres would not go away. He looked around at the almost zero visibility.

"It seems we can't get free of these blizzards, brother Sedova."

The response was a harsh noise which could have been construed as a laugh. The words flowed easily.

"If we want to be free of blizzards, we have to go south, brother Georgi."

It was an old theme put in a different disguise. Pik Sedova had made no secret of his contempt with the arrangements struck with the Barenkovs and Feodor Chernienko.

"I hear that you're having trouble with the Scandians."

Again, there was the derisive noise.

"Trouble! Trouble from the Scandians? They couldn't even trouble their own grandmothers!"

Georgi eyed him sharply.

"I've met some of the wounded! It seems our men are more easily

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handled than their grandmothers!"

Pik Sedova grinned and nodded slowly.

"We've got the measure of them - it won't be long before we put an end to the problem!"

### 22.

Gideon Steinbecker showed every sign of confidence as he sat opposite Michael ben Levi. He was aware that his movements had been tracked since the incident in Salem. His first move on arrival in Jerusalem had been to make an immediate request for an interview with the Administrator. Michael had greeted him when a secretary had shown him into the Administrator's office and had gestured to a chair. There was a long and appraising silence. Michael sat and watched the man he suspected of complicity in the murder of his own father. He waited for his coolly possessed guest to open the conversation.

Gideon took his time, he was a heavy man and there was a certain resemblance to Marcus physically, but that was as far as it went. Michael sensed that he had none of the charm of his father, or of his diplomatic nature. Gideon's first words confirmed it.

"I have been given to understand that my sister, Deborah is under arrest for some reason or the other."

Michael answered slowly.

"I am sure that if someone has taken the trouble to inform you of her arrest, they would have also told you of the charges, brother Steinbecker."

"I considered it an no more than an inflated rumour. I was given to understand it was on some vague charge of conspiracy to detain my father's widow against her will."

Michael nodded.

"You have been correctly informed, brother Steinbecker."

Gideon relaxed back in his chair.

"I would like to confront the person who has made such a ridiculous accusation."

"You are doing so, brother Steinbecker!"

Gideon eyed him for a moment.

"I understand you correctly? It is you who has brought these charges?"

"Correct - and also the suspicion of complicity in the murder of your father, brother Gideon!"

Gideon permitted himself a slight smile.

"Now, that is something I find too ridiculous for words, brother ben Levi - It is surely beyond the bounds of possibility that a daughter would conspire to kill her own father?"

"You find that difficult to believe?"

"I find the suggestion incredible to the point of being farcical!"

"It comes down to a question of motive - let us for a moment take the motive for detaining your cousin Leah against her will. Your sister is heavily implicated - Leah was found locked in a room of your sister's villa in Gazera. I

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find it impossible to believe that Deborah had no idea she was there. Another of your cousins has already confessed to his part in the arrangement and has implicated Deborah. On those grounds alone, I was justified in arresting your sister."

"I presume that you're talking about David?"

"I see that you know all about the relationship between them - and your late cousin Rebecca!"

There was a hint of emotion on Gideon's face at the mention of Rebecca. It was quickly suppressed.

"I think we all suspected Rebecca was a little unbalanced - although we could never have imagined she would go to extremes. I think you will find that Deborah was a very innocent party in all that transpired, brother ben Levi. If she was involved, it would have been to a very minor degree."

"Involvement in the detention of another person, whether to a minor or to a major degree, has to be answered, brother Steinbecker."

"Of course, brother ben Levi."

"You have suggested that Rebecca was unbalanced - would you accept that this lack of mental balance was enough for her to plant a bomb in your father's baggage, prior to his last journey? I put this to you - if she was able to influence Deborah to assist her in the matter of Leah, couldn't it be argued that your sister was also involved in your father's death?"

Gideon stared at him and shook his head.

"It will never hold water, brother ben Levi. You have no proof that Rebecca planted a bomb in my father's baggage - and you certainly have no proof that Deborah was involved one way or the other."

"Rebecca destroyed herself with one of her own devices - and your family estate as well - are you trying to tell me that she had no hand in the murder of your father?"

"I am saying that you have no direct proof that Rebecca planted a device in my father's baggage - and according to your own knowledge, Deborah was at her villa in Gazera when Rebecca was killed - or are you trying to imply that my sister can be in two places at the same time? You will also find that Deborah was on the other side of the planet when my father was killed - perhaps she used her unique ability to be in two places at once, on that occasion as well?"

Michael held his gaze.

"It needs only one to pack baggage with a lethal device, brother Gideon, but all conspirators are equally guilty no matter where they might be at the critical time. I can assure you that I will track down every conspirator involved in the death of your father - and those involved in the illegal detention of Leah Steinbecker. We already know that your sister received a number of incoming messages from a man during the time of Leah's detention. It will be only a matter of time before that man is identified and called to account!"

Gideon nodded slowly.

"And just what are your plans to call these so-called conspirators to account? How will you proceed with a trial? Who will be the judge or judges? Who will carry out the verdict? I am sure we will all be interested in those answers, brother ben Levi."

"We, brother Gideon?"

"Those who are interested in justice. In the meantime, my sister and

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her - co-conspirators - are being held without trial - that is also a matter for justice being seen to be done."

"It is also a matter of justice that one who has been improperly detained, has redress for the wrong done to her."

Gideon relaxed his face into a thin smile.

"Perhaps I should try to talk some sense into my dear stepmother. Leah appears to have a persecution fixation."

"If you do, brother Steinbecker - I will ensure that you join your sister and her - co-conspirators - on the charge of interfering with a witness!"

Gideon's smile expanded.

"You appear to have an excessive personal interest in this matter, my dear Administrator - perhaps your judgement is becoming prejudiced. I do hope - in the event that this interesting trial does take place - that you will disqualify yourself from acting as a judge on the grounds of partiality."

Michael glared back at him without smiling.

"You may rest assured, brother Steinbecker, that I have already made that decision. I will not be the judge - I will be the prosecutor!"

Gideon's smile didn't waver.

"I am quite certain - given your attitude - that you will be quite vigorous in the exercise of your duty! May I enquire if you intend to keep my sister incommunicado, or am I to be permitted to visit her?"

"You can visit her, brother Steinbecker. It will not be a private visit, but one under supervision."

"I would expect nothing else, brother ben Levi."

It took some time for Michael to quieten down after his visitor had left. He had never known that he was capable of such rage. He was more than ever certain that Gideon was as involved as his sister, in Leah's abduction. He was beginning to waver about both of them being involved in Marcus's death. More and more it looked like the work of one person, an unbalanced and insanely jealous woman who had decided that if she was to be denied the love of the man she professed to love, then no one else would have him. Michael would have given a great deal to know the conversation which must have taken place between Rebecca and Marcus in the hours before he had left on his ill-fated journey to Jerusalem. Perhaps, there had been a final rejection which had triggered Rebecca's insane act.

Two majors themes chased each other in his mind - on the one hand was Leah - and on the other was Gog. Leah had retreated to her small house in the suburbs of Jerusalem. She had spent three days under his roof and had recuperated from her ordeal, before declaring herself well enough to set up house with her children. Since that time, he had seen nothing of her and when he had spoken to her through the communicator, their conversation had been nothing more than an enquiry after her health and well being and a polite response that all was well. He held his patience and subdued his desire to pursue her. He knew she needed time and that it would be a serious miscalculation to try to exert too much pressure.

The other theme - that of Gog - was showing much more progress. Michael already knew that the Siberian refugees were now spread out in a great arc, some two thousand kilometres long, across northern Russia. From this arc, they were drifting southward towards the boundaries of his extended responsibilities. He assumed that Feodor still considered himself part of the Central Administration. In reality, Feodor had very little alternative. There was

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a total severance of contact with Alexei Kharkov on the Yenesei. By this time, the old man might well be dead. The young Cossack had two options, either to remain with Michael - or to go it alone.

There was no clear indication of the whereabouts of Georgi Malenski. Reports from Anatole Balenkov placed him somewhere south of the Baltic - which Michael considered to be a gigantic leap from his last known position just west of the Urals. A cautious enquiry to Grigor Suskov, confirmed that Malenski had moved camp with the last of the huge group who had followed him across the mountains. Anatole's report had also mentioned another factor. There was the rumour of a secondary leader, nominally under Malenski's command, who was leading an armed force and doing battle with the Scandians. It was causing Anatole considerable apprehension and he was making plaintive requests for advice and assistance to deal with the situation.

Michael acknowledged that there was nothing he could do. Anatole Balenkov had charge of the lands from the Carpathians to the Baltic coast. He was in the direct path of any further movement to the west by Georgi's people, whether they were commanded by a military genius or otherwise. Anatole was also a weak link, he had only reluctantly followed his more enthusiastic brother, Alexander, and cousin, Feodor, into the new relationship with the Central Administration. Much would depend on the decisions Georgi Malenski would now make - or whether he was still in a position to make decisions.

Fleetingly, Michael thought about Elena and wondered if she and her son were still with the intense man some suggested was the monstrous Gog. He wondered if any woman could be counted upon to stay with someone who became identified with an opponent of the forces of good. Michael was under no illusions that the conflict which would eventually take place would be the last great battle between good and evil - Armageddon. He returned to his mental question. Would a woman like Elena Malenski stay with a man who became Gog? He supposed there had been many monstrous and contemptible creatures in the history of man - and he supposed as well, that at least some of their women had remained with them, regardless of what horrors they had perpetrated.

His thoughts turned to Leah. Did his question operate in the opposite direction? If he was to become the mystical Michael who stood up for his people, as well as a physical Michael, would a woman like Leah want to be associated with the man he had to become? Was this the reason for her aloofness? He stared out into the wintry sunshine of the Jerusalem winter and wished he knew the answers.

The position with the influx of Siberian refugees became clearer during the next few weeks. There was no headlong movement to the south, rather it was a slow infiltration down the rivers of the Russian plain. More and more communities found themselves required to share what had been stored, with the extra mouths. The advance began to lose momentum as the weather slowly improved. Most of those who had walked the thousands of kilometres across the Siberian plains were weary of dragging themselves forward. By nature, they were not nomads and so, they began to settle amongst those who had been established for centuries. There was inevitable conflict.

Feodor watched the progress, sending his scouts northward to monitor what was happening. Much the same was happening in the lands controlled

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by Anatole Barenkov, except that here, there was a definite encroachment across the unofficial dividing line between the Central Administration and that of the Asia Heartland. There were occasional sightings of Georgi Malenski. He appeared to be following a program of visiting the larger settlements along the corridor from the Urals. He was travelling alone, as far as could be determined.

The one positive result from the westward thrust was that the Scandian raiders were being blunted on its northern flank. Malenski's unknown general and his forces were acting as a buffer. For some time, this general remained unknown, and then he was given a name - Pik Sedova.

Michael looked over the report which had been placed on his desk. Luke Belin hovered silently close to the window.

"So - our military genius has a name - Pik Sedova."

Luke objected.

"He's hardly a military genius, Michael! I suppose anyone who can turn back the Scandians would get an inflated reputation. On the other hand, this Pik Sedova is hardly fighting against an organised army - just a rabble of hungry and ruthless scavengers."

Michael nodded.

"Perhaps you're right. What do we know about him?"

"Nothing! Except that I doubt if that's his real name."

"Why?"

"Translated, the name simply means Mount Sedova - I think its situated in the north of Siberia somewhere."

"So, you think this Pik Sedova joined the march when Georgi moved down from the mouth of the Lena?"

"He was either with him when he started out - or he joined him on the way. Either way, he's a new dimension in what we're facing. He's formed an armed group and that's something new. Originally, Georgi's people got what they wanted by sheer weight of numbers - a kind of intimidation - now, they're prepared to take what they want by force."

Michael joined him at the window and looked out into the broad square in which the offices were situated. The warmer weather had brought out the citizens in greater numbers. He murmured.

"Against a people living in peace in unfenced cities."

"Say again!"

"Gog and his Horde will come against those living in peace in unprotected cities - they will come with weapons - enough weapons to provide firewood for seven years - if we are to take the thirty-ninth Chapter of Ezekiel at face value."

"And you do?"

"I see no reason to doubt it! You are right, the rise of Pik Sedova has implications far greater than acting as a buffer against the inroads of the men of Scandia."

He returned to his desk.

"I think it's time to have another talk with Feodor and the Barenkov brothers. We must find out more about this Pik Sedova and his relationship with Georgi Malenski."

Within the hour, the link was established. Michael waited whilst the three separated images coalesced. Alexander was the first to arrive by a few seconds. He looked wary but certainly not as ruffled as his brother who

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emerged from the mist of light a few seconds later. Anatole looked a wreck. His face was a mask of anxiety, which in turn was hiding sheer terror and hopelessness. Michael's spirits sank as soon as he saw him, but he hoped he kept his emotions hidden under an impassive facade. Feodor was the last to emerge. As always, he looked ready for a fight and on this occasion, it looked as he was ready to take on Michael in a frontal attack.

"Welcome, brothers - I'm so glad you could join me."

Michael used the maxim that a soft answer turned aside wrath. His greeting had the effect of blunted the antagonism.

"I think it's high time to review our current status and to make tactical plans."

Feodor snorted.

"By this time, we're lucky to have anything to make tactical plans about!"

Michael murmured.

"Perhaps, you had each better bring me up to date."

The latest reports were no more than a few hours old and he knew that it was unlikely that there was anything new to report. Anatole blurted out.

"There is a steady movement south towards the mountains. I estimate fully a half of my area is occupied by the invaders!"

Michael interjected.

"Do you mean the Scandian invaders or the Malenski invaders?"

Anatole hesitated.

"Why - the Malenski people, of course - the Scandians are being held back."

"By the Malenski invaders, I suppose?"

Anatole nodded.

"Then it would seem that they are earning their keep! Wouldn't you agree that the provision of rations is a good price to pay for being protected from those who would strip your storehouses and drive you out of your homes, and perhaps molest your women and children?"

Anatole hesitated.

"If you put it like that, Michael - "

"I do put it like that, Anatole. I put it to you all that Georgi Malenski has shown no hostility against any of you. Even you, Feodor, can only report that there is a slowing down of the flood of refugees from the north and that they are trying to find living space to replace that which they have lost in Siberia."

Feodor interjected angrily.

"In so doing, these - peaceful - people are fighting those who have possessed the land for centuries. Can you blame people for defending what has been theirs for hundreds of years?"

"Can you blame people who are hungry and who have dragged themselves thousands of kilometres across a wilderness, for trying to establish themselves in a new land - where there is plenty for all?"

Feodor gestured impatiently.

"This is an argument we shall never resolve, Michael! There is one ultimate fact you cannot deny! Every kilometre these people move to the south brings them one kilometre closer to the Plain of Esdraelon - where you are destined to meet Gog! Let's forget the logistics of feeding tens of thousands of people out of limited resources - let's focus on the ultimate issue - the Battle of Armageddon!"

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Michael nodded wearily.

"I hear what you are saying, Feodor. The ultimate issue is always with us - like the poor. The Battle of Armageddon will take place. The Plain of Esdraelon will be the place of carnage - but that is not now! Now is when we must act in Christian love and charity towards those who hunger, who thirst, who are dispossessed, who are wretched and nearly naked. If we do otherwise, we are no better than those we will meet one day in that ultimate battle. Don't you realise that this is part of OUR final test? How we handle the situation now, is being watched and assessed and forms part of that which we will have to answer for at the End of Time?"

There was a profound silence. Feodor's tone had altered when he asked.

"So, Michael, what do you suggest we do now? - What are these tactical plans you want to put into action?"

"Feed them and in so doing, pacify them. Make room for them and in so doing, make them your friends and neighbours. Extend a hand of love and friendship and in so doing, show whose Children you are!"

Alexander hadn't spoken until that moment. He cleared his throat.

"You suggest that we open our borders and our storehouses and convince our people to welcome the newcomers?"

"In so doing you will show brotherhood and friendship."

Anatole interjected.

"What about this general, Georgi Malenski has turned loose on us."

"I think you will find that he has turned him loose on the Scandians - I think we need to know a great deal more about Pik Sedova and I think you are in the best position to get that information!"

## 23.

Georgi withdrew into the fur cape draped about his shoulders and sat hunched in the inadequate shelter of skins stretched across fallen timber. The cape had been provided by his host, as had been the shelter they were sharing. Sedova's woman had silently thrust a bowl of thin soup into Georgi's hand. He wasn't sure whether the silence represented awe or resentment. He was almost beyond caring. He was conscious of the steady appraisal of his general in command.

"You are very quiet, brother Georgi. Did you expect me to show you something different?"

It was a challenge.

"I saw nothing I didn't expect to see - Half frozen men, clutching weapons they hardly know how to use, waiting for an enemy they can't see in the blizzard and expecting to die within seconds of that meeting!"

Pik snorted in derision.

"That about sums up the situation! Despair and hopelessness is the order of the day - and all we can expect is more of the same, if we carry on our thrust to the west. The Baltic polders are a frozen wasteland and I doubt

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if its much different further to the west. To go to the north is out of the question, it is more of the same, only worse! Of course, we can always return to the east - If that's what you really want!"

Again, a challenge. Georgi stirred and tipped the rest of the congealed soup into his mouth. It was already cold and tasted worse than when it was hot.

"We come back to your suggestion that we turn south. The Scandians will still attack us if we do. It makes no difference to them if we go west or south, either way, we are across their path."

Sedova smiled slightly. It was the first sign of a concession that the south could be a consideration. He infused confidence into his voice.

"I told you! We have the measure of the Scandians. If we move south, we will be fighting them on our terms. The polders are a wasteland - and it's their country - they know their way around. Draw them out on to the higher ground to the south and we'll be on equal terms."

Georgi eyed him steadily.

"You will be defending your rear and your western flank as well as moving south. You haven't enough men!"

"Then send me more!"

"Untrained and ready to be butchered!"

"I'll train them - as I've done with those around us. They learn quickly enough when it's a matter of survival!"

Georgi shook his head wearily.

"We're not an army of conquest."

"Agreed! We are defending ourselves and the right to feed our starving women and children."

Once again, Georgi looked at him steadily. Sedova was never short of the right words but equally, they always sounded false and lacking in conviction.

"Perhaps you are right. I have to think about it."

"Well, don't take too long, brother Georgi! My men are looking to you to provide the answers. They trust you - don't lose that trust or you might lose much more!"

The big man moved out from the shelter. Georgi stared after him. Were his words a warning - or a threat? As he expected, it was impossible to sleep in the freezing conditions. Beyond the shelter was a curtain of driving snow. The blizzard had not eased since his arrival. The thin stretch of skins slapped with the gusts of wind and the supports to the rough wooden frame creaked under the strain.

The decision whether or not to move to the south became one of simple logistics. To continue to the west would become increasingly fruitless if all they were to meet were more blizzards and countryside frozen into unproductivity. No one could settle in such terrain and under such conditions, it would be impossible to plant crops and reap a harvest. Sedova had reported a steady stream of refugees, the local population who had lived there for centuries, was beginning to abandon ancestral lands before the onslaught of the arctic conditions. On that basis, Georgi had no other decision to reach - they would move south!

He tried to sleep again and was just dozing when he was jerked into full wakefulness. There had been the hint of another sound when the wind had eased momentarily. It was a pulsing, throbbing noise and he thought he

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heard voices - singing or chanting - he shook his head in disbelief, the conditions were getting to him - in such circumstances, no one would have the energy or the inclination to sing. He listened for some time, trying to hear a repeat of the noise when the wind gusted, but it wasn't repeated. Eventually, he slept, but he jerked awake often.

On the next day, Pik Sedova listened intently when he announced his decision. The big man grunted and nodded when he had finished.

"You have no other option, Georgi. We will head down the old coast until it turns and runs west. Then, we'll strike due south until we reach the mountains."

It would be directly into the heart of the area controlled by Anatole Barenkov - and Michael ben Levi. Malenski wondered what their reaction would be. It was a critical decision and one which could not be reversed once his tide of refugees were on the move once more. The only thing to stop that advance would be an armed force and Pik Sedova had already shown that he was a match for those who had tried to prevent their access to the Baltic lands. Georgi debated silently whether it would be construed as an act of conciliation for him to visit Anatole's headquarters on the Vistula, to explain his intentions. He looked at Pik Sedova and found the big man eyeing him critically. He decided against the visit, it might be construed as an act of weakness - Sedova had warned him about undefined consequences and he couldn't risk them becoming a reality.

Strung out behind them, across the northern plain, were a series of focal points into which the airlift of refugees were being discharged. It was an ongoing process. The flood of people from beyond the Urals had slowed, but was by no means spent, as more and more abandoned the marginal lands which were being swallowed up by the southern progress of the arctic weather conditions. He spent several days at each location, involving himself in the logistics of caring for the tens of thousands of refugees who were pouring in.

He soon came to realise that there was more than one trend to the south. Pik Sedova might be leading the armed force, but there was also a steady flow of farmers and displaced people moving towards the country controlled by Feodor Chernienko. It could only be a matter of time before the de facto boundary between them was crossed. Once again, he debated whether it would be advisable to make a conciliatory approach and once again, he decided against. It was hard to explain why, other than that daily, he felt more and more vulnerable.

It was three weeks before he returned to Gorki. In that time, the several hundred kilometres between the Baltic coast and the Carpathians had been crossed by Pik Sedova. He had pressed on into the high mountains, meeting again the severe, icy conditions they had left to the north. Because of their conditioning, the mountains were no barrier and now, they stood in the uplands facing out over the polders of the Adriatic. They had gained access to the Great Sea and the riches which lay beyond it.

There had been no resistance and there had been no squeals of protest from Anatole Barenkov - or from Michael ben Levi. Sedova's forces presented a thin wedge between the domain of Alexander Barenkov and the unknown steward who looked after Joshua Aristides interests in the Italian Peninsula and the Alpine lands to the north. Further to the east in southern Russia, there had been a similar, slower movement. The impetus was spent

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and they had spread out in the lands just short of the area controlled by Feodor Chernienko. Once again, there had been no expressions of alarm or protest. Georgi began to breathe a little easier. He was almost relaxed when he rejoined Elena and his son in their new lodgings.

It was the first time he had visited the quarters allocated to him by his staff. He hardly took notice of the change from the Spartan conditions to which he was used, to that of comparative luxury. He had a sudden urgency to see Elena and his son. The parting with his wife had been strained and their reunion was not much better.

Elena stood in the centre of a reception room and looked strangely out of place in the surroundings. She had reluctantly changed from the rough clothing which she had worn in their long trek, into a simple dress which looked more like a tunic. She wore no ornamentation or jewellery. For some reason, the simplicity looked like a reproach and Georgi felt his irritation rising.

She looked steadily at her husband, he was still wearing his travel stained clothing. He looked tired to the point of exhaustion and almost emaciated. His eyes seemed the only vital thing about him, fierce, flickering around the room, absorbing everything and finally returning to her.

She had done very little to personalise the place. She couldn't dismiss the thought that this was an aberration, a mistake which had been forced upon them by well meaning advisors, who did not understand Georgi's determination that they should not be treated in any way differently to the thousands of refugees, who still had hardly enough to keep their souls within their bodies.

"Well, Elena - don't you have a greeting for me?"

It was a challenge, but this was not the time to answer it. She walked over to him and stood within his reach. Slowly, he extended his arms to embrace her. She felt his tension, he was like an over-wound spring, she wondered when it would be wound too far and would snap. He kissed her on the lips, but it was curiously emotionless.

"Where's Piotr?"

She didn't have to answer, the boy raced into the room and threw himself into his father's arms. Elena stepped back and watched them. There was animation, tenderness, love. Georgi emerged from behind the mask of the stranger and was momentarily the man he once had been. Elena dismissed the thoughts of envy, they were unworthy of her.

"I have prepared food for you."

It was something she had insisted upon doing, resisting the advisors who had wanted her to abdicate her responsibility. Georgi looked up and nodded, the mask of wariness had slipped back. She led the way to another room and stood with hands folded at the table. Georgi hesitated, the words of thanks and invocation of a blessing were clumsy, as if he had grown out of the practice. They sat down and ate in silence and she wondered about the influences which were changing her husband from a devout, godly man - into - she hesitated to voice the thought in her mind - into Gog!

Piotr fired a volley of questions - the sort of questions a devoted and interested wife should have asked. Where had he been? Who had he met? Had he seen his army fighting? How far had they reached? Georgi answered them all patiently. She thought she saw a hesitation when it came to the questions about an army and fighting and how far they had advanced. The

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last question provoked a sharp counter question.

"Have you met Pik Sedova?"

"What do you know about Pik Sedova?"

The boy's eager expression faltered, his father wasn't pleased.

"Some of the other boys have been talking about him."

"What have they been saying about him?"

"That he's a great general - he's your general - and that he's fighting and beating the Scandians and now, he's leading a great army to the south."

Elena interjected.

"As you can see, Georgi, Pik Sedova is a very popular man - he is quite a hero to some."

Georgi gazed at her steadily.

"But not to all, Elena."

"I've never made any secret of my reservations about him, as you well know."

Georgi leaned back and smiled for the first time.

"I wonder what the poor man ever did to you to make you dislike him so much."

"I haven't given him the opportunity to do anything to me, Georgi - and never will!"

"It's late, Piotr - I think it's time for bed."

The boy looked as if he wanted to protest but thought better of it.

"I'll be along to see you when you're in bed."

It was almost like the old days at the mouth of the Lena - Georgi's nightly visit to the boy. Elena looked at her husband - was the old man returning? He caught her glance.

"Do these sumptuous quarters boast a bath?"

She nodded.

"We have everything we need."

"But you think we shouldn't have them - there are too many others who still have nothing?"

"It was your rule - we would have nothing for ourselves until everyone had the basic necessities."

"Most have enough - and those who still come, were the ones who chose to stay behind when we passed. I don't intend to wear a hair shirt all my life!"

"So - we live here because you decided? I thought it was your advisors who insisted on it."

"I was the one who gave the order, you can put your conscience to bed, Elena!"

She stared at him.

"I'll get your bath ready."

Later, she looked into the room where he was bathing. He lay motionless in the steaming water. She thought he had fallen asleep, his eyes were closed and his face had relaxed into something approaching the soft lines it had once had. She moved closer and suddenly, his eyes were open, alert, ready to counter attack. Was that how he reacted when anyone approached him? Always expecting an attack, always ready to defend himself? He relaxed again and stretched and the old grin returned for a moment.

"This feels good after so long!"

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She knelt by the tub and started to wash him. It was the way it had been in those distant days at the mouth of the Lena, when they had no cares and the world had been beautiful. He caught her wrist and she stared into his eyes. His look was intense, she whispered.

"I have something to tell you, Georgi. Something which won't please you - I'm pregnant!"

His look didn't change and neither did the grip on her wrist.

"Are you sure?"

"As sure as one can be after a few weeks."

"When - ?"

"When did I conceive? On the night you came back from the meeting with Grigor Suskov."

He drew her closer and kissed her on the lips.

"I'm sorry, Georgi."

"Why should you be sorry?"

She hesitated.

"Because I know you don't want another child."

"What gave you that idea?"

"You did - You've said it so many times, quoting your friend Marcus Steinbecker. This isn't the time to bring children into the world. They have no future."

He released her and climbed out of the tub and started to dry himself.

"Get this into your head, Elena. If you are carrying another child, I will be a father to it. Perhaps it will have no future, I don't know - can anyone know? I am coming more and more into the certainty that we are puppets on a string. Hooks are in our jaws! Ah! I see you don't like that expression, but I can tell you that I am becoming convinced that our future isn't in our hands. If you bear a child, that will be part of the plan and if you are mistaken, it will also be part of the plan. We have no option other than to be dragged along to where those painful hooks lead us!"

She turned away.

"It was very different when I told you we were expecting Piotr."

His response was harsh.

"We lived in a fantasy world, where everything was love and peace. Piotr was part of the illusion of benevolence. I've seen too many little corpses frozen solid by the side of the trail, some of them in the arms of dead mothers who tried to suckle them with nothing! I have seen too many boys the age of Piotr, trying to hold back the Scandians and being butchered - Please! Don't talk to me of the times when everything was bright and peaceful and you placed a beautiful man child into my arms!"

She stood as straight as a ramrod and stared at him.

"If you want to live amongst corpses and butchery, that is your decision - as for me and my son - and this unborn child - we will live in the memory of those days when Georgi Malenski was our loving husband and father - a godly, thankful man - not what he is to day!"

"And what is he today - Why don't you say it, plenty of others are? Georgi Malenski has become Gog!"

She held his gaze.

"It isn't something to boast about, Georgi - even if you were Gog - but you are not! Gog will be totally committed to the destruction of everything which is godly and every remnant we have left of the Kingdom of Peace. He

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will seek to destroy, pillage and rape. He will be merciless. He will have no concern about dead babies in the arms of their dead mothers by the side of the trail, or of boys the age of his son who are being butchered by the Scandians. He will be a ruthless man - an evil man. No matter how you try, Georgi Malenski, you can't force yourself into that mould - no matter what others want to call you, you will never become Gog!"

She walked out of the room and left him staring after her. He threw the towel to one side and pulled on a tunic. His rage and frustration grew, all the more so because he had to accept that it was his mishandling of the news she had given him, which had provoked the argument. He moved around the room restlessly. His relationship with his wife was going from bad to worse. This ought to have been an evening of reconciliation. The news that she had conceived his child ought to have been a bridge back to past days.

There was a barrier in the way over which he could not climb. He was no longer the man who had been the steward of fertile lands and a happy people. Now, he was the leader of a dispossessed horde and no matter what Elena thought, it was Gog's Horde!

It was impossible to reverse the change in his nature, he had seen too much suffering and death. He bitterly resented the agency which had permitted such a calamity to fall upon a defenceless and innocent people. He had hardly dared to acknowledge who was that agency, but now he permitted the thought that ultimately, all things became the responsibility of God!

He sat on the side of the bed and thought about it, perhaps that thought alone - his blaming of the Almighty God for everything that was happening, was enough to make him Gog! He accepted the possibility with a curious calmness and thought back to his words to Elena: 'I am becoming convinced that our future isn't in our hands. If you bear a child, that will be part of the plan and if you are mistaken, it will also be part of the plan. We have no option other than to be dragged along to where those painful hooks lead us!'

He crossed the window and looked out into the night. Somewhere, far to the south, Gog's general stood poised to move forward into the rich province of the Adriatic. The long spine of the Apennines would separate them from the Western Basin of the Great Sea. They had reached a cross-roads. The refugees still poured in from Siberia, there were additional pressures from the population of China and India. He had no idea what their future movements would be, but eventually, there would come a competition for the remaining supplies which had been stored in the time of plenty. He considered the options.

Michael ben Levi stood behind those who stretched across his path to the south. For the time being, the flow had eased to a trickle in that area. Alexander Barenkov occupied what had once been termed the Balkan Peninsula and now Pik Sedova had taken possession of the high peaks which formed his north eastern boundary. The soft spot was the Adriatic, the Italian peninsular and its extension through Sicily and the ridge to the African continent. It was a long, narrow, treacherous land bridge which separated the Western and Eastern Basins of the old Great Sea. One of the links between Europe and Africa.

Joshua Aristides waited in the West, in his Iberian stronghold and to the east, Michael ben Levi watched his every move. To the south, Micah Perga was an unknown quantity. Georgi had never met him, but he was

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reputed to be one of the more inflexible of the old Covenant of Administrators.

Elena did not come to join him that night, and a stubborn pride prevented him from seeking her out. He debated whether he should remain in Gorki for Piotr's sake, but decided to cut his loses. Early in the morning, before the household had stirred, he slipped away, the solitary pilot of a Pod which he pointed to the south-west. The bleak uplands to the north of the Adriatic depression seemed more hospitable than a house of estrangement.

### 24.

In an earlier age, the action taken by Micah Perga, would have been called a pre-emptive strike. Michael ben Levi was not alone when it came to monitoring the movements of Georgi Malenski and his people. The Administrator of the North African Area kept himself very well informed. He had a network of agents scattered throughout the Barenkov stewardships, on the surface, they were busy fostering trade relationships between Africa and southern Europe. They served a secondary purpose, by ensuring that a steady flow of information was received at Micah Perga's headquarters on the Nile. Some would have said that he was even better informed than his Central Administration counterpart - and he was certainly better prepared to take decisive action when he considered the time to the right.

With growing concern and rising impatience, he had watched the steady infiltration of the Malenski force into Anatole Barenkov's stewardship and then the swing to the south bringing Pik Sedova's army within striking distant of the rich and numerous food storage facilities stretching down the length of the Adriatic polders and the spine of Italy. His impatience was magnified by the failure of the Barenkovs to do anything about stemming the flood of refugees and the apparent reluctance of Michael ben Levi to take action.

Micah Perga was not a patient man and there came the moment when he decided to take unilateral steps to secure the threatened storage facilities. He was quite aware that he had no legitimate grounds upon which to take such action, he was also aware that he would receive little more than a few bleats of indignation from his neighbour to the north.

He was one of those Administrators who had dispensed with talking during the time of the Kingdom of Peace and had decided to act upon the suggestion of Joel and Asher. On the surface, he had demonstrated a neutral position. Behind the scenes, he had accumulated materials for the fashioning of weapons and he had secretly trained what he had euphemistically termed, 'a defensive militia'. The end result was that he was adequately prepared to take on the might of the Sedova army with trained and armed men.

He had already taken the precaution of moving his units to the extremity of his area of responsibility, the polders of the reclaimed sea bed which formed the southern end of the land bridge between the two great basins of the old Mediterranean. Beyond the mountains of Tunisia was the start of Joshua Aristides's Administrative Area. Micah was quite certain that his troop movements had been duly noted by his wily neighbour, but there

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had been no hint of objections.

He had also moved a fleet of sea transporters to the area. He waited for Pik Sedova to make his move. It wasn't long in coming. One of his agents reported the arrival of Georgi Malenski at the Sedova camp and soon after, they were on the move, continuing southward into the fertile lands of the Adriatic basin. Micah Perga ordered his army to embark and joined them for the sea crossing along the north-western coast of the Eastern Basin. They disembarked at the mouth of the old Adriatic, where a line of polders marked the limit of reclamation. Six hundred kilometres separated the two armies. Inevitably, they would meet somewhere along the length of the ancient sea and the first direct conflict of the Time of the End, would ensue.

The news was brought to Michael ben Levi at the beginning of the second day. At first, it was no more than the report of a large fleet moving to the north-west along the ancient, extended and contiguous coastline of Sicily and Calabria. Another communiqué told him that Pik Sedova was also on the move, down from his Alpine encampment, into the rich lands off the Dalmatian coast.

Luke Belin was almost dancing with impatience, waiting for his employer to absorb the information and then take some sort of decisive action. Michael put down the report, leaned back in his chair, steepled his fingers in his usual irritating way, and closed his eyes. Luke found it impossible to keep silent. He demanded.

"Well, Michael! What are you going to do?"

Michael rocked too and fro and then murmured.

"I think I'll go and visit, Leah!"

He opened his eyes suddenly and smiled into Luke's thunderous expression.

"It's not our battle, my friend - study your scriptures and you will find that we will not be directly involved! Incidentally, having read the scriptures, you will find that you will have to arrange some sort of conference with the warring parties!"

He hadn't visited Leah for over three weeks. It was more than time that he did so and the news of the impending battle was as good an excuse as any. He presented himself at the door of her small house and was ushered by a startled servant, into a little room overlooking a garden. He stared out into the small plot whilst he waited. There was evidence that someone had been busy trying to bring order to the overgrown tangle. He heard her come in and didn't turn.

"One of the least attractive results of the release of Satan, is the return of briars and thorns."

"They've always been with us, Michael, perhaps we notice them more now."

He turned and found her standing just behind him. He took her hand and she didn't resist when he kissed her on the cheek.

"I'm surprised to see you, Michael."

"I deserve that - I'm afraid I've neglected you since you moved here."

"I didn't expect you to act as my nursemaid!"

Still the prickly independence!

"Do you and the children have everything you need, Leah?"

She nodded slightly and didn't lower her eyes.

"You didn't come to ask me that."

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"Surely, I don't need to find an excuse to come to see you, my darling, Leah - I still want you to be my wife!"

Her hand raised defensively.

"You agreed not to rush me, Michael!"

"I did, but my stupid heart doesn't listen to what comes out of my mouth!"

She shook her head.

"Poor Michael! I'm not being very fair to you, am I?"

"No! You are not! But, when has love ever been fair?"

They walked together back to the window. He held her hand and she didn't try to draw it away.

"I see you've been busy."

"It passes the time between taking the children around the city and looking after the house."

"It sounds like a waste of your considerable talents."

She glanced at him quickly.

"And just what are my 'considerable talents'?"

"It must be quite a switch from administering a stewardship of a billion people, to sightseeing and gardening."

"Perhaps - but don't offer me another job at the Secretariat, Michael. I'm not sure I'm ready for that."

"The job I had in mind would be more of a personal nature, my darling. To console and soothe the overworked Administrator."

She laughed and pulled away. It sounded more like the old Leah. He grinned at her.

"You can't blame a man for trying!"

"Why did you really come, Michael."

The smile faded.

"I thought you might like to hear the latest news."

"Something has happened?"

"We've just moved beyond the phase where Gog - 'overruns the richest districts of the province, distributing spoil, booty, and property to his followers and laying his plans against the fortresses , but only for a time.'"

She looked puzzled.

"I don't understand."

"Micah Perga is on the move! Use your considerable talents to call up the Book of Daniel."

He watched her enter co-ordinates into the computer pad. It was like old times. She had a flush of interest. She looked at him.

"What passage?"

"Try Daniel 11: 25-28."

She completed the entry. On the display screen on one wall, the text started to scroll.

'He will rouse himself in all his strength and courage and lead a great army against the king of the south, but the king of the south will press the campaign against him with a very great and numerous army; yet the king of the south will not persist, for traitors will lay their plots. Those who eat at his board will be his undoing; his army will be swept away, and many will fall on the field of battle. The two kings will be bent on mischief and sitting at the same table, they will lie to each other with advantage to neither. Yet there will

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be an end to the appointed time. 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.'

She murmured.

"Micah Perga - the king of the south. That was what Marcus called him!"

"Micah has gathered some sort of army and embarked along the coast from Africa to the Adriatic polders. I have no idea what he has in mind to do, unless he intends to try to defend the storage facilities in Italy and the reclaimed area. Pik Sedova is moving down from the Alps, he's already on the flat lands. The two armies will meet somewhere - and then watch what happens!"

"When did Micah form his army?"

"About the same time that Asher formed the Central Area Militia! They both decided to go ahead with Joel's plan. We couldn't get a consensus of opinion in the Council of Administrators, so they decided to act unilaterally."

"And Joel, who initiated the idea - didn't."

"One of the ironies of life, Leah. Joel was always a stickler for following correct procedure. The Administrators couldn't agree, therefore he didn't proceed!"

"What's going to happen in the Adriatic?"

"According to the prophecy, Micah is going to be defeated! All reports tell us that Pik Sedova leads a force of battle-hardened men, who have learned to survive against the Scandians and even subdue them. I suspect that he's coerced some of them into joining him. They're a tough and rough lot and Micah has untried men, who have been trained by theorists from the Time of Peace. I doubt if they have a ruthless bone in their bodies - and certainly, there wouldn't be one who has used his weapon to draw blood, let alone kill another man. Again, if we follow the prophecy, Micah will find himself defeated by his own supporters. When it comes to a bloody battle, I think they will say - enough is enough!"

The opposing armies met amidst a cluster of peaks rising out of the polders, it was close to the Dalmatian coast. There were many storage facilities in the area and an obvious objective for both forces. At first, there was a stand off - a wary assessment of what each faced. It was Pik Sedova who initiated the attack and the untried men of Micah's army found themselves in mortal combat with ferocious warriors who neither gave nor expected any quarter. Michael was proved to be correct. Pik Sedova had seen the value of the rapacious men he had fought and beaten on the Baltic Sea and had bought their allegiance with plentiful rations and the pick of the booty they could pillage along the way.

The sizeable detachment which Micah had sent to secure the storage depots, was almost wiped out. The survivors fell back and immediately provided their leader with a major problem. There was consternation amongst his advisors and he had to engage in a great deal of straight talking before he could be sure he had quelled thoughts of rebellion.

With the coming of night, there was a lull in the warfare. Micah would not have been so complacent had he known that Pik Sedova didn't usually let the coming of darkness interrupt a battle. It was a tactical move, he sensed the defenders were demoralised already and giving them the opportunity to

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talk over their sorrows could win the battle for him.

The so-called King of the South called his captains to a conference. Most of them looked as if they had barely escaped with their lives from the day's proceedings. One held forth at great length and concluded:

"I tell you, Micah, we are no match for these people. They'll wipe us out!"

There was a swell of agreement from his fellow captains. Micah glared from one to the next.

"Do I have to remind you that this was our first encounter with an unknown enemy?"

He was interrupted.

"They might have been unknown this morning, but now we know them - and another encounter will probably be our last!"

Micah was scathing.

"I take it that you're suggesting that we put our tails between our legs and run for our lives? I thought I was dealing with men of courage - instead, I find cowards playacting as soldiers!"

One growled.

"I'd sooner be a live coward than a dead hero - Why are we here? Answer that, Micah Perga - By what right are we here in this godforsaken sea bed?"

Micah ground out his answer.

"We are here with more right than these - barbarians - who think they have the privilege of pillaging everything in their path. We are here because if we fail to hold them now, it won't be long before they overrun the Saharan wheatlands, or are washing their bloody swords in the Nile! Does that answer your question?"

There was a heavy silence. Another asked.

"So - You are telling us to fight them tomorrow? What will it take to convince you that we're not equipped to stop them, let alone turn them back - the deaths of another ten thousand men? I remind you, we lost over a thousand men today and that wasn't against the main force. This Pik Sedova played with us. Tomorrow he will show us he's finished with games!"

The army Micah Perga had brought against Pik Sedova, was slowly pushed to the south during the next few days. Their skills in the art of warfare were honed by bloody hand to hand fighting around the coveted storage complexes. One after the other, they fell into the hands of the northern invaders and eventually, Micah Perga found himself with his back to the inland sea of the Eastern Basin, across which he had sailed with such confidence only a few days earlier. He had started with twenty thousand men, when he fell back to the coast, he had less than two thousand.

There was one final, bitter briefing on the fifth evening. The men who had led his army on the first day, were not present. They had been killed on the second and third days. New men faced him, defeated men who had tried everything they knew and had come to the realisation that they had not known enough. They eyed each other in silence. Micah broke it.

"What are the chances of an attack tonight?"

"If I was Pik Sedova, I would take the opportunity to wipe us out!"

Micah stared into the younger man's bloodshot eyes.

"If you were Micah Perga, what would you do?"

There was a slight hesitation.

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"I'd get to hell out of here whilst I was still united with my breath!"

Micah looked hard at the trio who faced him. At the start of the disastrous venture, he had had a hundred captains, now, he had three - and they had been field promotions because the men they had replaced had been cut down by superior forces. Another one interjected softly.

"It's better to run away to fight another day - whilst we still have legs!"

Micah nodded wearily, he was a pragmatist. He was defeated and he knew it. For some reason, an oblique statement by Michael ben Levi came to mind. He had said something to the effect that the North African Administration would be threatened on three occasions. He felt the bitter bile rise - Michael ben Levi had sat on his hands in comfort, whilst his army had been wiped out by the hostile forces. It was something for which he would eventually make Michael answer. He made up his mind.

"Evacuate the men to the ships - and do it quietly. Keep the fires burning and hope that our friend Sedova decides to resume battle in the morning and not mount a surprise attack."

The last of his men were safely aboard the transporters long before the dawn light touched the sky over Jerusalem. Micah Perga had not slept, he had been busy rousing his agents from their comfortable beds in the major cities along Alexander Barenkov's western boundary. There was no doubt that the pitched battles had been observed and that the outcome - the disaster which had overtaken Micah Perga had been widely circulated.

His agents were hardly surprised to be summoned, but they put on a diplomatic pretence and expressed suitable horror and consternation that such a reversal to the fortunes of their sponsor could have been allowed to take place. Micah listened to it all with growing cynicism and waited for the platitudes to run their course. He had one objective and by the time he had explained himself, his agents were ducking for cover.

"I want to contact Georgi Malenski and one of you is going to be my messenger!"

He was told that there was no possible way that contact could be established. No one knew where the elusive Malenski was to be found. Micah patiently reminded them that it was they who had reported that Malenski was with Pik Sedova. The answer was swift. It had not been a hard and fast sighting, merely a rumour and that, even if Malenski had been with Sedova several days earlier, he would no doubt be thousands of kilometres distant by that time.

When it was nearly dawn and when it was already early in the working day in Jerusalem, Micah Perga received a request for communication from the Central Administration Secretariat. He hesitated before deciding to accept the request. He hadn't slept for nearly thirty hours and even then, it had been no more than a cat nap of one or two uncomfortable hours between battles. He was unwashed, stale and exhausted and certainly no match for the smooth platitudes of a freshly manicured Michael ben Levi.

He nodded to a hovering secretary and tried to recede into the shadows of the holo-pad. He was a little surprised to find himself facing a stranger.

"Greetings, Administrator Perga, I am Luke Belin, I am Michael ben Levi's personal assistant. He has asked me to offer his assistance - should you wish to contact Georgi Malenski!"

Perga blinked, it was a direct approach and refreshingly free of

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bureaucratic protocol. He eyed the image of Luke Belin and found himself being equally and directly assessed.

"I heard that ben Levi had left Simon in Salem - so, you're the replacement. I see you haven't learned the art of diplomatic niceties."

"I thought you would prefer a more direct approach in the present circumstances - I thought you would favour it."

Micah stared at him again.

"I do - So, Michael ben Levi thinks he can arrange for me to talk to Georgi Malenski when a half hundred of my agents find it impossible to find him. How does he propose to pull off this miracle?"

"Does it matter? He wouldn't suggest it if he thought it was an impossibility."

Micah nodded sardonically.

"Loyalty too! You'll soon find that the sun doesn't rise and set because ben Levi commands it! Very well - if you think you can arrange this meeting, do so! I'll be interested to see how well you do."

Luke Belin nodded and closed the circuit. Micah sagged in the exhaustion he hadn't chosen to show ben Levi's representative. He went out on deck and watched the sun touch the polders where so many of his men lay butchered. He was quite sure that by this time, Sedova would know that his would-be opponents were sailing away in defeat. Perhaps he was also watching, as the flotilla of now mostly empty ships eased away from the shore in the direction from which they had come.

Micah looked at the deserted decks and remembered how they had resounded with the excited chatter of the young men who were about to test their mettle against the unknown enemy. He felt sick with frustration. He had misjudged the strength of the army pitted against him. He had committed the unpardonable error of sending infants into battle against merciless butchers and now, he had nearly twenty thousand families with good reason to curse his name and spit on his shadow when he passed. He made a silent vow - their deaths would be avenged. The time would come when Sedova and his men - and Malenski himself, would give account.

## 25.

It took three days of negotiation before a meeting could be arranged between the warring parties. Micah Perga withdrew his fleet from the coast from which he had evacuated the survivors of his mauled army. He refused to retreat further, although he was quite impotent to prevent the rabble under the command of Pik Sedova from ravaging the storage facilities he had tried to defend. For his part, the conqueror made sure his conquest was advertised. As each facility was looted, it was destroyed. Growing crops were torched and the smoke of their ruin was clearly visible to the powerless Administrator of North Africa.

It took Luke Belin, on behalf of Michael ben Levi, to track down the elusive Georgi Malenski. It was no surprise to find that he was not far away from the scene of his general's triumph. His response to the overtures for a

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meeting between the protagonists, was cool.

"I see no reason why it is necessary for me to meet with a man who had no right to interfere in the simple task of feeding hungry people."

Luke's response was schooled by Michael.

"Michael ben Levi and Joshua Aristides are also interested to enter into discussions with you - it seems to them to be an ideal opportunity to do so."

In point of fact, Joshua had been less than enthusiastic and it had taken pressure from Michael to cause him to change his mind. Malenski had given ground, but he ensured the meeting would be on his terms. It was out of the question for him to travel to Jerusalem or some other point under the control of the interested parties. He agreed to meet on neutral ground - and so, on the morning of the fourth day, four men met in a villa on the slopes of Vesuvius, with the smoking mountain behind them and the blue waters of the Western Basin lapping the reclaimed lands off the ancient coast.

Michael had been the first to arrive in the meeting room, he was closely followed by Joshua, they had little time to exchange pleasantries before Micah Perga marched in. His greeting was barely civil. Georgi Malenski kept them waiting until the precise moment the meeting was scheduled to begin. He slipped into the room alone, disdaining to have even a secretary with him. Michael felt a twinge of disappointment, he would have liked to have had the opportunity to get his first look at Pik Sedova.

Micah Perga didn't greet his enemy. Diplomacy demanded that Michael should step in before a free fight developed.

"Thank you all for attending this meeting at such short notice."

Micah Perga was typically brusque.

"Let's cut the pleasantries shall we, and get on with it. I want to know who has given Malenski the right to invade the territory of other stewardships and pillage their storage facilities and murder their population!"

Georgi Malenski eyed him steadily.

"Hunger has given me the right to demand food for my people. As far as I am aware, no citizen has been murdered unless they were the first to use weapons against us! I ask you the question. What are you doing here so far from your area of responsibility and involving yourself in matters which are not your concern?"

Joshua interjected softly.

"The steady infiltration of your people has become the concern of all of us, Georgi. You are not moving into empty lands, they have been settled for many centuries. If you are meeting resistance, it is no more than you can expect."

Malenski turned his steady gaze to him.

"In three years we appear to have come a long way from the concept that all men shall share in the bounty provided by God. During the Kingdom of Peace, when we were under the teaching of the Firstlings, it was always said that the fruits of the field were for all - even if there was no contribution in any way to the production of those fruits. It was said that we were to all share in the benevolence of the Father, who alone could provide the harvest."

There was a moment of silence. Micah returned to the attack.

"You are placing this before us as your defence?"

"No - I make no defence to you or to any others. I am stating the rule

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under which we have prospered for a thousand years. I am saying that there shall be none who shall starve or be in need. I am saying that we must not return to the days which existed before the First Resurrection, when billions starved to death whilst the privileged few indulged themselves with every luxury!"

Joshua interjected again.

"Surely, that is the responsibility of the Administrators, Georgi. We have received a commission from the Firstlings, to distribute a fair share to all."

"On the journey from the Lena, I lost a million men, women and children - my Administrator, Alexei Kharkov, could offer me nothing other than the advice that I should spread the people around his stewardship, resettle them and feed them from the resources we would find. This I have done!"

Micah erupted.

"Does that include the ravaging of the Adriatic polders? Does that include the destruction of storage facilities after they have been looted, or the torching of crops? I'm surprised you can't see the smoke from here!"

"My people have not entered into any area which was not entrusted to Alexei Kharkov by the Firstlings!"

"Rubbish! What about the stewardships of the Barenkov brothers?"

"I intend to make some thing clear to you - I do not recognise the legality of the appropriation of the Barenkov lands into the responsibility of the Central Administration - any more than I recognise the interference of the Administrator of North Africa in the area of the Adriatic!"

The silence was profound. Michael answered.

"I responded to a request from the Barenkov brothers and from Feodor Chernienko. I exercised my legitimate right as a joint partner in mutual ventures. Alexei Kharkov has been cut off from us for months - as you well know."

Joshua question was silky smooth.

"Tell me, my dear brother Georgi - How is my cousin Alexei? I had in mind to pay him a visit - do you foresee any difficulties?"

"Alexei Kharkov is an old man whose health is not robust. The severe conditions have taken their toll upon him. I am sure he will be delighted to see his cousin from the west."

Micah growled.

"Let us get down to business."

"I agreed to come here in order to do so."

Michael took the initiative.

"I think we all agree that we do not wish to see a repetition of the carnage which has taken place during the past few days. This is a point in history where we could enter into a cycle of attack and retaliation, into which every Administration would eventually be drawn. The alternative is to stand back and withdraw from such a course.

I suggest that we must agree to disagree over those things which have already taken place and to try to find a resolution of the problem of the Siberian and Scandian refugees by peaceful means. I agree with Georgi that no man should starve. I disagree that to take by force from others, is a legitimate solution. These are my proposals:

The Administrators must allowed to fulfil their function to distribute food and other resources. The infiltration of refugees into populated territory,

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must be controlled by them. Above all, the raiding of stores must cease, as must all other aggressive activities - no matter from what source, or under whatever provocation."

Georgi Malenski was silent. He looked from one to the other.

"I think you are forgetting one other factor."

They returned his gaze.

"You are forgetting Gog! The Administrators cannot control Gog. A higher power controls his movements. Whatever is agreed today, will not be binding on him. He will do what he is destined to do - and none shall stop him!"

Joshua answered softly.

"Correct me if I am wrong, Georgi. Gog is surely not with us here today. We are four troubled men, meeting to discuss the regulation of a movement of people which has got out of hand. We are the interested parties. Surely, Gog has nothing to say in these discussions?"

He earned himself a penetrating gaze and a soft reply.

"If you say so, Joshua - Only remember this, we are living in the time of Gog!"

Michael turned to Micah.

"What are your views on my suggestion, brother Perga?"

The answer was grudging.

"They have merit. Regulation is the answer - but we must be confident that all parties will be bound by our agreement. I will ask you, Malenski: Can you control the devils you have unleashed?"

There was a long silence.

"I have given no instruction to remain in the Adriatic basin. Our interest was in the stores to feed our people. Having obtained those stores, our interest in the area is at an end."

"What about other areas?"

"If you refer to the appropriated areas of the Asia Heartland, I remain in dispute with the Central Administration. I am told that our people have been absorbed. I see no reason for further expansion."

"What about relinquishing the territory in the stewardship of the Barenkovs?"

"That will not be possible! As far as I am concerned, it remains under the control of Alexei Kharkov until the transfer is formalised. Therefore, I am not exceeding his instructions when I settled the refugees in those areas."

Joshua turned to Michael.

"What do you say about that, Michael?"

"Earlier, I said that we must agree to disagree over those things which have already taken place. I am of the opinion that it would impose an additional hardship on the refugees to displace them for a second time. I will insist on one thing, however. No citizen must be disadvantaged in those areas - and each of the Barenkov brothers must be allowed to control his stewardship without hindrance."

There was another long silence. Joshua asked quietly.

"Are we all in agreement?"

There was no affirmation other than grudging nods - but neither was there a negative response. Michael stood.

"I will arrange to have a document prepared and entered into record. Let us signify our acceptance before we disperse."

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At best, it was an armed truce. Michael was under no illusions that the peace would fall apart under the first stress. He returned to his suite at the villa, knowing that the other three participants had done the same. He wondered who would be the first to visit him. Almost on queue, his door control intoned the presence of a visitor. He activated the control and admitted Joshua.

"That was a thorny session, Michael!"

"I expected nothing more or less. In the circumstances, it was the best we could do."

"Like Georgi, I believe that all we've done is bought some time. What does it say in Daniel? '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 grinned.

"I see that you've been doing your homework. Now, we must await the 'appointed time' for the next phase in the saga to unfold. Satisfy my curiosity. Is it really your intention to try to visit Alexei?"

Joshua hesitated.

"I must admit, it was just a little window dressing to try to get some information from the tight lipped Georgi. I have very little excuse for a visit - unless it would be to pay my respects to an ailing cousin I hardly know."

"I'm sure the other Administrators would be interested know how the land lies."

Joshua sounded gloomy.

"The ground is frozen solid from all accounts! Are you suggesting that I go?"

"It might serve a useful purpose - other than enquiring after his health. It would settle the question of whether he's alive or dead! It would also test the good will of our friend Georgi. It would verify what we have been told about the disposal of the refugees."

Joshua smiled.

"You could make the trip yourself - you are nearer!"

"He's not my cousin!"

Joshua roared with laughter.

"We understand each other, Michael - It so happens I think it would be better if you remain in Jerusalem. For better or worse, you are emerging as the Prince of the Covenant and we need you to keep your eye on Gog!"

Michael murmured.

"You HAVE been doing your scriptural homework!"

"It was something I learned from Leah - By the way, how is she?"

Michael suppressed a grin, the question was artificially casual.

"I presume that you heard about her abduction?"

Joshua nodded.

"A nasty business - and dear cousin Rebecca killed Marcus! An incredible sequence of events. I hope Leah has recovered from her ordeal."

Michael hesitated.

"Not fully - I think it will take time - physically, she seems fine, but mentally, the whole affair has left its mark."

Joshua looked concerned.

"If there is anything I can do? - "

"Perhaps, you could visit her on your journey to or from Alexei."

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Joshua shook his head and laughed.

"You're a persistent man, Michael ben Levi! - I'll think about it!"

About two hours after Joshua left, there was another request for entry. Michael touched the control and was surprised to find that his heart was beginning to thump in anticipation. He wasn't disappointed, he had been almost certain that Georgi Malenski would not be able to resist the opportunity to meet him again.

"Greetings, Georgi."

Malenski nodded and entered the room. Michael closed and sealed the entrance after him.

"You expected me to pay you a visit?"

Michael nodded.

"Why?"

"I'm surprised you have to ask that."

"Normally, enemies do not meet each other."

"Then, we are not enemies - otherwise, you would not be here!"

"That sounds childishly simple. You are not a simple man - nor are you childish. Our destiny is to be enemies."

"I told you last time - I will never call you Gog unless you call yourself Gog - or until you start to act like Gog - Do you remember that?"

Georgi nodded.

"I remember - It would seem that you are the only one left who is not convinced that I am the monster from the north who will sweep down upon Israel!"

"Have you convinced yourself, Georgi?"

"Am I not acting like Gog? Doesn't the battle we have just waged with Micah Perga prove to you that I am Gog?"

Michael sat on the corner of a table and swung his leg. Georgi looked exhausted to the point of collapse. He had sagged back into the chair Michael had offered.

"I think the battle proves that Micah Perga is the 'King of the South' - but then, Marcus Steinbecker always said that he was - but, the battle does not prove that you are Gog, Georgi."

The sunken eyes stared back into his.

"Then, who is?"

Michael held his gaze.

"You are not the only one who has come from the distant places of the north, Georgi - you have many Scandians in the army which fought Micah - perhaps, Gog is to be found amongst them."

Georgi smiled slightly.

"Why don't you mention his name, Michael? - You think it could be Pik Sedova!"

Michael shrugged and turned away.

"Why not? But, it could also be you - but when I listen to you trying to justify what has happened, I hear a man who is trying to convince himself that he is on the right course and who is trying to reconcile what has taken place with his ideals of feeding the hungry and housing the dispossessed. I do not hear Gog!"

The silence was prolonged.

"Thank you for a compassionate assessment."

Michael walked across to the window. It was nearly dark, and the

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column of smoke from Vesuvius was highlighted in the setting sun.

"You are like that mountain, Georgi. A hidden force lies deep within you. If you are Gog, the force will erupt with irresistible power and will engulf those around you and we will meet on the Plain of Esdraelon and fire will heap on you from the sky and you will be totally destroyed. If you are not Gog, the inner force will emerge in some other way, but be warned, it will still have the potential to be destructive to those who are close to you."

Georgi rose to his feet slowly and joined him at the window.

"You and me, we share a destiny, Michael. You are driven to be what you must become - just as I am being forced into a path I do not want! Is there any hope for either of us?"

It sounded like a cry from the heart. On an impulse, Michael placed his arm around his shoulders. Georgi was as tense as a drawn bow. Michael tried to make his voice light.

"If we share a destiny, perhaps it is that we shall be friends, no matter what else is demanded of us. Perhaps, we are another David and Jonathan. They were friends, but their paths often placed them in opposition because of conflicting loyalties - "

Georgi whispered.

"And the end of Jonathan was to die on the field of battle together with his father, Saul - both repudiated by their God!"

Michael dropped his arm and felt suddenly embarrassed. It hadn't been his intention to show the depth of his emotions. It was a moment which had passed and he felt that it would never again be repeated. He tried to change the subject.

"How is your son - and your wife?"

It was another mistake which he saw as soon as he had said the words. The guard came up again.

"They are both well, thank you. Elena sends her regards."

It was no more than a polite form. Michael was well aware that Georgi had not been within two thousand kilometres of his wife before starting out to the conference.

"And Piotr? He must be your pride and joy!"

Georgi permitted a little smile.

"Every father is proud of his son. Piotr is a fine boy. Tell me, how is the son of Marcus Steinbecker?"

"Very well - he lives with his sister and mother in Jerusalem now."

"And Leah? How is Leah?"

Michael hesitated, he wasn't sure how much Georgi knew about the abduction.

"She has recovered from her unfortunate experience."

Georgi nodded.

"It will take a long time before she is able to put aside the tragedy of her husband's death."

"The grieving process is slow."

Georgi's face lit up into a rare, mischievous smile.

"Be of good courage, my friend! The lady will one day come round to your way of thinking!"

Michael smiled and nodded.

"I hope that is what we are, Georgi - friends! I hope we will remain as we part today. Remember, if there ever should come a time that you have

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need of me, you may be sure that I will respond!"

Georgi shook his head slowly.

"You have your scriptures reversed, my dear Michael! It wasn't Jonathan who had need of David, it was David who had need of Jonathan. Do you remember the incident of the warning arrows? It was Jonathan who warned his friend to escape for his life!"

"Between us, I somehow think it will be the other way around - remember - you can count on me!"

Afterwards, when he thought over the conversation, Michael wondered whatever had possessed him to emphasise the point. It had never been his intention to declare an undying friendship with Georgi Malenski. He asked himself the pertinent question: How could it ever be possible for Michael to be a friend of Gog? He could not come to an answer.

### 26.

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!"

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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 enthralled 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

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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

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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 do 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 battlefield?"

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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

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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

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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!"

27.

Anatole Barenkov suffered a few seconds of paralysis when the door to his private office was thrust open without warning by his wide-eyed aide, who pronounced in tones of awe and doom.

"Georgi Malenski - "

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He had no further opportunity to say who or what applied to Georgi Malenski. Standing just beyond his shoulder, was the man himself. Anatole met his eyes in shock, it was quite visible in his expression. Georgi looked slightly amused and said nothing. Anatole made a valiant effort to recover his mental balance and forced a smile.

"Hearty welcome, brother Georgi - this is a most pleasant surprise."

Malenski stepped around the gaping aide and advanced into the room. Anatole nodded to his secretary, who fled the room, closing the door on the visitor and his host. Georgi extended his hand in greeting.

"Thank you for your welcome, brother Anatole. It isn't always a pleasant surprise when one has an unexpected guest."

There was a further hint of amusement. Anatole nodded and led him to a pair of chairs set in the window recess. Malenski stood for a moment and admired the view.

"You inhabit a beautiful part of the world - even if it is suffering under the same conditions as elsewhere. I sometimes wonder where the winds from the north originate, we are quite powerless to stop them."

Anatole swallowed - it was a reminder that not only the winds from the north were unstoppable! What did the man want!?

"I am sure refreshments would be acceptable after your long journey."

Malenski smiled again.

"It so happens that my journey was long, and the Pod was not well equipped - it was one of Grigor Suskov's fleet - which he has kindly provided for my use."

It was a better description than - commandeered! Georgi was becoming expansive.

"Not well equipped, perhaps - but better than trudging thousands of kilometres over frozen ground."

Anatole groped for something to say.

"A terrible experience, brother Georgi."

The humour was gone, his guest nodded agreement.

"Terrible and educational, brother Anatole. One learns a great deal about our fellow man in such circumstances. We see his resilience - and we see his selfishness!"

Anatole thumbed the call control with unnecessary violence - his aide appeared in the doorway, looking as if he expected to view a scene of slaughter. Anatole managed to request something hot and substantial in a near normal voice. He turned back to Georgi and found him eyeing him steadily.

"I am very happy to see how peacefully our displaced brethren are being assimilated into the local community. There has hardly been an instance reported to me of resistance or bad feeling - you are to be commended, Anatole."

His host stammered a reply.

"I think it lies in the nature of our people. We are noted for our hospitality in this region and we also realise how terribly these people have suffered."

Once more there was a steady appraisal.

"I can only wish that all shared in your co-operative approach - I have just returned from a venture which quite frankly, has sickened me. Our people were met by an army determined to keep their hands on what they

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considered to be their private resources. The result was a terrible loss of life, the destruction of crops and storage facilities - and all to no avail. They could have been spared the suffering and loss, if we had met with co-operation in the first place."

The refreshments arrived and were set on a small table. The aide scuttled away as quickly as possible. Malenski looked after him.

"That man seems very nervous - perhaps he has a guilty conscience!"

"Possibly."

The visitor sampled the hot soup and nodded in appreciation.

"Very good - I'm glad I surrendered to an impulse and diverted to come and see you - it WAS high time that we renewed our acquaintanceship. If I remember correctly, the last time we met was at one of the conferences held by our dear Father Alexei on the Yenesei - It would have been at the time when Marcus Steinbecker was there I think."

It was too good an opportunity to miss. Anatole asked carefully.

"How is dear Father Alexei?"

Georgi set down his cup slowly and shook his head.

"Not good. In the last three years, he had weakened visibly. We all know how frail he was and I am sure that it was only the benevolent conditions of the Kingdom which allowed him to travel around and conduct the affairs of the Administration. All of this has changed of course. He is now so frail that he isn't able to get up from his bed until well into the day, and then, only for a few hours. He tires very quickly. Of late, Pirakov and Demetri, the two remaining stewards in the provinces to the south of his headquarters, are constantly there, trying to help him. I would have liked to stay with them but it wasn't to be, I had to travel with my people - it was father Alexei's wish - and poor, dear Kazym, who looked after the neighbouring stewardship to mine, at the mouth of the Yenesei, was killed in an ice fall a year ago. So, you see, my dear Anatole, things are not good with our dear Alexei and out of the his eight stewards, two are trying to support him, one is dead, I am travelling - which leaves Grigor Suskov, Feodor Chernienko, your brother Alexander and yourself - and three of you have deserted Alexei and attached yourselves to the Central Administration. I find it hard to understand."

Anatole stared at him and his larynx wobbled in an attempt to swallow from a dry mouth. Georgi's tone was as sweet as honey. He sounded sorrowful that some of Alexei's beloved 'sons' had deserted him when they were needed most. Anatole stammered.

"We felt we had no option - because of the worsening conditions - and then, we had not been able to contact the Yenesei for some time before the decision was made."

Malenski's tone was sweetness itself.

"If only you had waited for a few more days - or had consulted with Grigor Suskov, who knew that I was coming and that I carried news of our dear Father Alexei - Never mind! What is done is done. I have explained my reservations about your decision to our dear brother, Michael ben Levi. He understands my views - and he has agreed that we should cooperate in the assimilation of the refugees and provide all that is needed so that no one goes hungry. With good will and co-operation, we will be successful."

"I'm sure we will, brother Georgi."

Malenski nodded and drank the last of his soup and set the cup down. He seemed in no hurry to depart. Anatole remembered the customs of

hospitality.

"If there is no urgency for you to continue your journey immediately, it would be my pleasure if you shared our evening meal and stayed with us."

Malenski smiled a little.

"What do we read in the scriptures? 'Be hospitable to one another without complaining. Whatever gift each of you may have received, use it in service one to another, like good stewards dispensing the grace of God in its varied forms.' As we do it for our displaced brethren, so we do it as individuals. Then again, we can read: 'Remember to show hospitality. There are some, who by so doing, have entertained angels without knowing it!' - I gladly accept your offer, my dear brother Anatole!"

Georgi was escorted to a guest room and Anatole was left to lick his wounds and try to make some sense out of what was spinning around in his head.

As soon as the visitor was alone, he slumped down into a chair. In the days when everything was at peace and he administered the lush stewardship entrusted to him around the delta and lower reaches of the Lena, it had been second nature to parley and to bargain with fine words and clever phrases. The art of diplomacy and of clever talking came harder now, they belonged to the era which would never return. On the other hand, he was coming to the realisation that very little could be stabilised by force of arms - that was Sedova's way - it was also Gog's way - and he was not yet ready to surrender to Gog!

The bed was soft, it yielded to his body, but his body would not yield to it. He was as tense and as stiff as a board. It was small wonder that Elena shrank away from him. He clasped his hands behind his head and glared up at the ornate carving of the ceiling. They used a great deal of wood in this part of the world. It was an ancient craft - and he supposed this to be an ancient house which would have stood for most of the last thousand years. He thought of Elena again and felt a surge of longing which he had thought had been frozen out of him during the long trek across Siberia. Only once during that time, had the tension eased. It had been when their goal was in sight. Contact had been made with Grigor Suskov - it had been another session of diplomacy and he had returned from it and in the hours of that night he had surrendered to the need he had suppressed for so long.

He thought again of the last time he had been at home in Gorki with Elena and Piotr and how he had reacted to the news that she carried another child. He wasn't proud of his response, or of the fact that he had slipped away without so much as saying farewell. This night, he was committed to staying in the house of Anatole Barenkov - and he wasn't quite finished with the flustered steward of the province north of the Carpathians. He had a message for him - and through him, to his brother Alexander in the Balkans - and perhaps, even to the upstart Cossack, Feodor Chernienko. After his messages were delivered, it would be time to return to Gorki and repair the rift which had developed with his wife and renew his relationship with his son.

He bathed but made a point of dressing in the simple peasant's style he had adopted across the Siberian plains. Fine clothes were for other times and the severity of his garments might tend to reinforce the message he intended to bring home to the Barenkovs. When he joined his host and an assembly of hastily summoned senior administration officials, he found them in their festive best. He was pleased to stand out amongst them like a sore

thumb.

Anatole made hard work of keeping the evening convivial. He avoided contentious issues and Malenski was content to let him do so. It was only at the end of the evening, when the wine had flowed a little and tongues were beginning to loosen and there was a general atmosphere of relaxation, that he manoeuvred the conversation round to the purpose of his visit. He turned abruptly to Anatole.

"It is good to be amongst kinsmen, my dear brother - although it might be more correct to call you cousin. I seem to remember that there is a family link some way back in our genetic history."

Anatole actually blushed.

"I wasn't aware of that, brother Georgi."

"Yes - it probably dates from six or seven hundred years ago, when one of my ancestors decided to seek his happiness on the banks of the Lena. My family actually comes from a little further to the south and east than here - somewhere around Kharkov where our other cousin Feodor has his base. I seem to remember that the Barenkovs left that area also, at about the same time. I always thought we were a little like the sons of Noah who left their father on Ararat and went in their separate directions."

Anatole nodded a couple of times and tried to form an appropriate answer.

"Our ancestors would certainly appear to be adventurous people, brother Georgi."

Malenski nodded encouragingly.

"How strange our destinies are, brother. Now, because of the change in the weather conditions, we find ourselves walking back over the route our ancestors took. This time, we have death and starvation as company - and what do we find? We find those we left behind so many centuries ago, ready to open their arms and their hearts to we who have returned in poverty - ready to share everything they have! This evening I have been drawn into your fellowship, I feel the strong bonds of kinship - it is as if we have known each other all our lives. It makes our bond so much firmer, I will go further - permanent! We share family ties and those ties cannot be undone by the politics of strangers. I raise my glass to you - all who are my kinsmen. I salute you and I make a solemn oath never to loosen the ties which bind us together!"

He stood and raised his glass. One after the other, those who sat around the table did the same.

"To our insoluble kinship, brothers and cousins!"

He drank the glass empty and watched as they all did the same.

"Now, I hope you will excuse a weary man. I had little sleep last night in the camp of Pik Sedova. His men are a rowdy lot and have a rough discipline. They were celebrating the victory their comrades had won over the forces which tried to stand in the way of obtaining food for the hungry and I was expected to have a part in the celebration. I had little sleep, so I bid you all good night and peaceful dreams."

There was a chorus of response and he slowly vacated the room. Long before he reached his bed chamber, his face had eased into a grim smile. There was no doubt that it would be some time before his host and his advisers took to their beds. First, there would be a thorough evaluation of every word he had spoken and they would try to read into them his intentions

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for the future.

He tried to relax on the soft bed, it felt alien. He thought again of the whispered discussions taking place around the table below. They would try to determine the future he would dictate - How could they do that? He had no idea himself of what the future would bring. He drifted into sleep, but he was restless. At one moment, in the middle hours of the night, he was wide awake. Something had disturbed him, but he wasn't alarmed. He might have come without companions or a posse of guards, but he was safer in the house of Anatole Barenkov than if he had been sleeping in the camp of Pik Sedova. He doubted if anyone would have the courage to try to do him harm - they knew what they could expect if they did. His restlessness was borne out of his over active brain. He had dreamed once again - a recurring dream in which there was always an accompaniment of wild, distant music, of drums and cymbals, of bells, of chanting, carried in the wind. It was something outlandish, without the culture of the Kingdom of Peace. It originated much earlier than that, it was primitive, basic and touched on his nerves and emotions.

He drifted back into sleep again and his dream did not return. When the dawn came, he was waiting for it. He rose quietly and dressed and then wandered out through the open windows of his room into the struggling garden which bordered the house. Once, it had been a lush, almost tropical place, but the cold arctic winds had ended that. In the clear light of the dawn, he could see how the chill wind cut into the clusters of bushes. It bit into his own flesh too. He wondered if it was his imagination, or was it becoming colder? The crops which had been planted in the northern areas under his control and where many of the Siberian refugees had resettled and were trying to scratch sustenance from the soil, would have a hard time coming to maturity. Their yield would hardly be enough to feed a fraction of the numbers who were relying on them.

In the southern areas, there was still a passable yield. They were the lands he had hesitated to enter. The Adriatic polders and the lands around Vesuvius had opened his eyes. They were still much more productive and he knew that further south still, in those areas controlled by Micah Perga, the conditions were even better. It had only been a matter of a few days earlier that he had reluctantly agreed that Sedova should lead his fighting men southward. He knew then, that there had been no alternative - his destiny was to move south and that had been the reason why he had fought against such a decision. Regardless of his reluctance, it had been a productive move, the stores which had been stripped out of the Adriatic polders were adequate evidence.

He shared breakfast with his host. Anatole still lived well, the feast of the previous evening and the substantial meal placed before him now, proved it. He said suddenly.

"What we have here on this table, brother Anatole, would have fed twenty men for a week during our flight across the steppes!"

His host stopped munching and then swallowed hard.

"I'm sorry if it offends you, brother Georgi!"

Malenski eyed him with a hint of mockery, it was the first time the timid Anatole had dared to show a little spirit - it probably had something to do with his guest's imminent departure. He answered softly.

"It doesn't offend me, Anatole - I merely made a comment - a

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comparison. I am overjoyed that there is enough in your storehouse, even after the refugees have been fed. I could prove a point with those who accuse us of stripping everything bare and leaving our hosts to starve!"

Anatole was still defensive.

"I can assure you, we have enough."

"And I repeat - that is good. Now, before we part, let us think about what the future holds."

Now, he had the man's full attention. Malenski took his time, his message was not something to be hurried.

"Last night, we spoke of our kinship and before I slept, I thought over what we said to each other. I told you that I am uneasy about your alliance with Michael Ben Levi. Now, please, don't misunderstand me. I have a very strong affection for Michael, but that doesn't disguise the fact that he has acted on the edge of legality by appropriating the stewardships of our dear Father Alexei. These lands and those of your brother and of Feodor Chernienko, have been administered by the Asia Heartland from the very beginning of the Kingdom. At that time, it was the bond of kinship which forged the Administration. It is on this basis that I have the gravest doubts about the wisdom of your decision. I believe that your best interests are not being served. Michael Ben Levi has enough problems and a vast area to control, stretching from the Far East to Jerusalem. He has capable stewards but they are trying to combat fearful conditions in India and China and to the east, across the Lena. Lands which I found necessary to evacuate.

I put it to you, my dear brother, would it not be better to associate yourselves with your kinsmen? Michael ben Levi is nearly four thousand kilometres from you. His attention is focused on his troubled provinces. Would you not be better served by re-establishing your links with your fellow stewards of the Asia Heartland - especially now that so many of your kinsmen are coming home as refugees and looking for relocation? I leave you with this question, my dear cousin. Perhaps, you will talk it over with your brother Alexander - and even our cousin Feodor. Think about it and I believe you will see the wisdom of what I suggest."

Anatole watched the small Pod carrying Georgi Malenski dwindle into a small dot in the eastern sky. It vanished and he let out a ragged sigh and slumped his shoulders. He tried not to read an ultimatum in what had been said - or in any of the comments and events of the visit of the man they were calling Gog. He had to admit to himself that Georgi had been sweet reasonableness, but then he remembered a passage in scripture about words being sweeter than honey to the mouth, but being sour to the belly!

Georgi Malenski was well pleased with his detour. He took his time covering the distance from the Vistula to Gorki and it was already late in the day when he touched down at the transit terminal. He was confronted by a troop of his advisors. They stood around the entrance to the transit lounge in a defensive huddle. For the first time in many days, Georgi's spirits were high, he was more than pleased with his visit to Anatole Barenkov. It was more like the old Georgi Malenski who greeted them as friends.

"Why the looks of gloom, my friends."

Malenski looked beyond them and felt his good humour evaporating. Elena and his son were not there. In itself, it meant very little but coupled with the way in which they had parted, it was a rebuke. He felt the familiar knot tightening in his stomach.

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"Is everything well, Ruri?"

He directed his question to his aide. Ruri had been his right hand man on the Lena.

"The situation is well under control, Georgi - Pik Sedova has reached his main encampment - they'll be celebrating tonight!"

"They were celebrating two nights ago! They'll be celebrating sore heads for the next few days!"

There were a few grins. His next question was sharper.

"So - what's wrong?"

No one answered.

"Ruri!"

"Elena has gone, Georgi!"

Malenski stared at him and felt his rage rising.

"Gone! What do you mean - gone?"

Ruri swallowed.

"She's gone, Georgi."

Malenski took his friend by the throat of his tunic. Ruri stared at him with strangely calm eyes.

"Killing me won't bring her back, Georgi!"

Malenski relaxed his grip and stood nose to nose with him.

"Where has she gone, Ruri?"

"South - She took a Pod and went south."

"And Piotr?"

"She took him with her!"

28.

Elena Malenski stood ramrod straight, she faced Michael with an unnerving, steady stare. She had ignored his request that she should take a seat. To one side of the room, their joint host Feodor, eyed the confrontation with apprehension. Elena had asked a straight question.

"Is it really necessary for you to come and hold the hand of your steward, Administrator ben Levi? I have asked for refuge for a few days. If my request is creating a diplomatic incident, I will gladly make other arrangements!"

Michael smiled.

"I think we both realise that you are not simply a traveller looking for refuge, sister Elena - and yes, you may well be creating a diplomatic incident - BUT, it isn't the reason why I have come to - hold Feodor's hand."

"Then why have you come, brother ben Levi?"

"I have come to make quite sure that you understand that I am pleased to meet with the wife of a man whom I admire and whom I have had the pleasure of meeting as a friend, in recent days. I have come to offer my services as a conciliator, if they should be needed."

She stared at him without blinking for a few seconds.

"What leads you to assume that conciliation might be necessary?"

"Won't you sit down, sister Elena? Unless you do, I can't - and I am

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feeling a little weak in the knees."

She eased silently on to the edge of a chair. The ramrod stance wasn't affected. Michael smiled and took the opposite chair.

"To answer your question, sister Elena, I don't know if the question of conciliation arises - if you say it does not, then please forget I made the suggestion."

She was silent again.

"I need some time to think - I needed to get away from - from Gorki."

"I'm sure Feodor is flattered that you thought of his house as a refuge."

Michael wasn't sure whether she heard him.

"I wanted to get Piotr away from talk of war and Pik Sedova - especially Pik Sedova!"

Michael caught Feodor's eyes across the room. He said softly.

"I can understand that, Elena - talk of war is not a good diet for a child of Piotr's years."

Elena went on.

"Georgi has changed so much - "

"I'm sorry to hear that."

"He isn't a father to Piotr - nor is he a husband to me. The man I once knew is slipping away. I don't know the stranger who has taken his place!"

Michael kept his mouth shut, the trickle was becoming a flood.

"I had to get away - I couldn't face him again. Every time he comes back from Sedova's camp, he seems brutalised. He is beginning to believe that nothing can turn back the change in him. He knows he is changing and even though he doesn't call himself by the name which everyone whispers, he believes he is becoming Gog and that there is nothing he can do to make it otherwise!"

The flow stopped. She looked up and met his gaze without blinking.

"I can't stay with a man who believes he is destined to be Gog. Neither can I allow my son to become the Son of Gog - neither can I allow another child to be born into the House of Gog!"

Feodor moved in from the side of the room and knelt by her, he took her hand.

"My dear, sister, you are more than welcome to my hospitality for as long as you desire."

Michael suppressed a sigh and a surge of irritation. He wondered what had been the point of his journey, if Feodor had already made up his mind to open his heart and his home. Michael could have saved himself the expenditure of energy. He intervened.

"I think the suggestion has a great deal of merit. You will have the time to think over your future plans, sister. The fact remains, however, that your husband should be told that you and your son are safe. I am sure, that by this time, he will be more than concerned."

There was more than a touch of bitterness in the response.

"Only if he can spare the time from his other responsibilities!"

Michael rose.

"It would be a good idea if we all were to get some rest. Before we do, Feodor will send a communiqué to Gorki."

She looked at his sharply.

"Make quite sure that he understands that I will not return - and neither will Piotr!"

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Michael nodded silently. Feodor played the solicitous host and escorted her from the room. Michael watched them and had the uneasy feeling that the romantically inclined Feodor was getting carried away with his role of playing the knight errant to a lady in distress. He waited until Feodor returned.

"She seems much more at ease, Michael."

"I'm happy for her - and I wish I could share her feelings! You do realise that we have a very delicate situation on our hands?"

Feodor nodded. Michael continued.

"Georgi is going to descend upon us like a visitation from the devil - "

"You might not be far wrong - if Elena's description of his personality change is correct."

"I prefer to consider him in the role of an indignant husband and father, whose wife has deserted him and taken his child with her."

"Not to mention that she's pregnant!"

"I'm glad to see that the delicacy of the situation isn't lost on you."

"I wonder what he'll do."

"He'll do what you and I would do. As soon as he knows where to find her, he will be on the doorstep demanding that she goes back to him."

"She won't go - "

"That is between them. I suggest we avoid taking sides. The best we can get out of this situation is to try to act as a strictly neutral party and attempt to broker a reconciliation."

Feodor wandered to the window and looked out.

"What do you think Georgi will do if she refuses to go home?"

"In the short term, I don't know. In the long term, there's always the chance that he'll move south into your territory, using the situation as a legitimate excuse! I'm afraid that Elena has put you in a no win situation. Georgi is always going to hold you responsible for providing a refuge for a runaway wife."

"That is grossly unfair! What was I supposed to do - turn her away and tell her to camp under the stars?"

"In my experience, a deserted husband is rarely inclined to measure events in terms of being fair, Feodor!"

A carefully worded message was despatched to Gorki. It was couched in the best diplomatic terms, it was to the effect that Elena and Piotr had travelled to Kharkov and intended to stay for an undefined period and that she requested total solitude for the duration of her visit.

Michael snatched as much sleep as he could, reasoning that the next few hours promised to be turbulent. He was mistaken, when he awoke, a response was waiting. In essence it was a polite acknowledgement, coupled with the almost casual greetings of Georgi Malenski to his wife and son. There seemed little reason for Michael to remain in Kharkov. The potential lightning strike of a vengeful husband appeared to be a non-event.

Michael returned home to Jerusalem and for the next few days was poised to deal with any developments - but there were none. Georgi appeared to have tamely submitted to the loss of his wife, son and unborn child. Michael would have given a great deal to have been able to look into the man's mind. He toyed with the idea of a surprise visit to Gorki, but eventually decided against it. It might have been construed as a provocation - on the other hand, Malenski was like a will-o-the-wisp. He was reported in a

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dozen different places within a few hours, always after he had left for some other destination. If this jumping around from place to place reflected his inner turmoil, it showed that Georgi Malenski was a very troubled man.

Some of the reports showed that he visited the encampment occupied by Pik Sedova on a number of occasions during the following few weeks. It was surely no coincidence that when he did so, he made a point of stopping over at Anatole Barenkov's base on the Vistula. The weaker of the two Barenkov brothers was being courted with a display of friendship which went beyond the joint administration of the lands occupied by the Siberian and Scandian refugees. Michael watched the developments, fully aware that Anatole was the most likely to crack under pressure, but powerless to do anything to retrieve the situation. During this time, there was no communication between Gorki and Feodor's estate. Elena remained in residence and in good health - there was no indication that she intended to move on.

Other developments were more pertinent to the security of the land bridge into Africa. Michael was quite certain that eventually, with or without Georgi's acquiescence, Pik Sedova would renew his advance down the Adriatic and as far south as he dared to go. Michael managed to plant a series of agents in his camp. They were soon discovered, of course, and they were dealt with quite ruthlessly. The reports they submitted before they were discovered, revealed that Sedova was building up his forces. New recruits were flocking to his side. It appeared that nothing succeeded like success. The word of the rout of Micah Perga's southern army, spurred on the undecided to throw in their lot with the new strong man. Sedova drilled them ruthlessly, sending them on forays into the lands held by Alexander Barenkov and the Italian lands held by Gela Licarte in the name of Joshua Aristides.

The severe weather conditions had given way to warmth and a resurgence of growth. It was much easier for the fighting men to move about. Michael watched the situation and knew that Sedova's men would strike before the severe weather conditions returned. He judged the critical moment would be when the harvest of the Adriatic Polders was gathered and could be expected to be in the makeshift store houses which had been built to replace those destroyed on the earlier invasion.

Michael arranged a rare holo-conference with Micah Perga. They had had little to say to each other since the conference in the shadow of Vesuvius. The 'King of the South' eyed his fellow Administrator with an expression which was a mixture of wariness and barely disguised hostility.

"I am surprised to receive your request for a conference, brother ben Levi."

It was an uncompromising introduction. Michael nodded and displayed a pleasant smile.

"We are both busy men, brother Perga - and we are both watchful men. I have no doubt you have been informed of the build up of Pik Sedova's army?"

Micah stared at him without blinking.

"I am aware of the build up - however, I will not confront them, if that is the purpose of this discussion!"

Michael nodded again.

"I respect your decision, brother Perga - but tell me, will that be your attitude if they cross between the Eastern and Western Basins into Africa?"

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Perga stirred a little, but he didn't drop his gaze.

"I will meet that situation if and when it arises. I do not deal in conjectures, brother ben Levi."

Michael eased back in his chair, which had the effect of placing his features in the shadow, he was well aware that his technicians were probably tearing out their hair - he was supposed to sit in the full glare of the overhead lights but his manoeuvre was deliberate.

"It is my assessment that there will be another thrust down the Adriatic Polders and then further, perhaps along the southern coast of Italy and Sicily and then on to the land bridge."

"On what do you base that - assessment? I suggest it is no more than conjecture. Such a move would extend Sedova's supply lines to a foolhardy length - and one thing I have learned about Gog's general - he is no fool!"

"He is building up his army - and my reports suggest that he has the infrastructure to support such a move."

Perga eyed him without blinking.

"I repeat, I will re-evaluate the situation if and when he decided to put his nose on the African side of the land-bridge. Now, I have a suggestion for you - call it my assessment - or even a conjecture, if that pleases you. Sedova has much closer targets than the land-bridge and the Saharan wheat storage. Your so-called ally, Alexander Barenkov might do well to watch his front, rear and flanks, I think - and you might consider warning our dear fellow Administrator, Joshua Aristides, that his Italian operation is the most vulnerable of all. Now, if that is all, I have other pressing appointments!"

Michael nodded and said softly.

"Yes - that is all for the moment, Brother Perga."

The big man faded from the holo-form abruptly. Michael stared at the empty space for a moment. Luke Belin entered the room.

"You heard what he had to say, Luke?"

"His manners haven't improved."

"Micah Perga will remain Micah Perga until the day he dies. He's always been a difficult man - but he's not a stupid man. He will meet Sedova head on if he ventures over the land-bridge. I'm quite sure that Micah hasn't been idle during the past few months."

"Joshua Aristides should be coming on-view within a few minutes."

Michael nodded and waited. Right on cue, Joshua emerged from the initial mist of the holo-connection. As always, he displayed a radiant smile.

"Greetings, Michael! How are things with you this fine morning?"

"You sound in a remarkably good mood for this time of the day."

"You forget, it is early morning here, spring has returned, the sky is blue, the trees are green, the grass is lush, the crops are in excellent condition, the birds are singing - "

"Stop! I get the message!"

"Why the forbidding expression and furrowed brow?"

"I've just completed a holo-link with Micah Perga."

"Ah!"

"That was an eloquent response! What does 'Ah!' mean."

"It means you have my heartfelt sympathy."

Michael's face wrinkled into a smile. Joshua went on:

"That's better! We all have our burdens to bear and I've had many discussions with Micah over the years - but I must admit, he gets more and

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more like a bear with a sore head these days."

"Another one suffering from a personality change."

"I take it that you're alluding to our friend Georgi? I read your private communiqué with interest - incidentally, how is the fair Elena?"

"Feodor reports her well and thriving - and very pregnant."

Joshua shook his head.

"My cousin Feodor was always recklessly romantic - especially when he thinks he has a cause - this time, it's a lady in distress."

"I said much the same thing to him and his response was: 'That is grossly unfair! What was I supposed to do - turn her away and tell her to camp under the stars?'"

"It might have been wiser!"

"You're older and more cynical!"

"I would prefer to call it practical. Malenski's response is, as usual, enigmatical - but I think he will show his hand before we are much older - and when he does, we won't be left in any doubt about how he feels."

"I think you are right, Joshua. I tried talking to Micah, but he puts on his usual front of blustering. I have no doubt that Sedova will strike down the valley of the Adriatic again. Firstly, it is the most logical thing for him to do - unless he decides to invade your Italian Stewardship - or that of Alexander Barenkov. I rather think Georgi will stop him from doing that - especially where Alexander is concerned - I have the impression that he's trying to woo the Barenkovs with fine words. To invade your stewardships would put him in direct conflict with you and I don't think he's ready for that. No - Africa will be his goal - not only is it logical but scripture tells us that he will attack the 'King of the South' twice more - and that means the land-bridge!"

Joshua eyed him steadily.

"You are well aware of the plans I have laid, Michael - I don't think an open line is the best medium for mentioning them."

"I agree - but I have another suggestion - something additional - I will send a message to you by one of my people. I thought I would forewarn you."

"I look forward to the visit of your messenger."

They closed the link. Michael had no doubt that the gist of his conversations had been relayed to other interested parties. He wasn't quite sure whether Malenski had the technical ability to break the security of the holo-link, but it was more than possible. Micah Perga certainly could, and he would have heard some home truths about himself. Michael grinned in appreciation.

Within a few hours, he had despatched Luke Belin with his message to Joshua. Not only was it in written form, but Luke was well qualified to enlarge on the details. Michael relaxed in this chair, well satisfied with his day's work. He sensed that there was little time before Sedova made his move. The summery weather would not last for long. Reports from the northern regions indicated the return of colder weather. In a matter of weeks, they would be plunged once again into the conditions which had driven the desperate refugees from their homes along the Arctic and which had created the groundswell of displaced people who had flowed into Europe.

The pressures on Feodor's frontier were building. With the coming of the surge of refugees from the north, those who had farmed the lands in the centre of Russia were finding themselves displaced. They in turn, were becoming refugees. Mostly disgruntled with the confiscation of their lands by

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stronger newcomers, they were turning to the south and some had already flowed over the invisible dividing line which separated the stewardship of Feodor Chernienko from that of Grigor Suskov. In the days of Peace, there had never been a formal border, such a thing was unnecessary, but there had been a demarcation of responsibility and it was this demarcation which was being breached. Michael's instruction to Feodor had been to allow entry and this had not gone down well with his firebrand friend.

Michael's stewards in the Far East had contained the flow of refugees from the north and from the lands devastated by floods in China and India. The situation had still not been repaired and now they faced another climatic onslaught. Michael wondered how much longer it could last. So much depended upon the fulfilment of the scriptural timetable. Even with the prophetic knowledge, it was still not possible to put these events in a hard and fast time frame. It was a replay of the situation prior to the First Resurrection, when no one could predict the hour when it would take place.

Michael came back from his reverie and decided it was high time to pay Leah a visit. His personal relationship with her was on hold. It could never improve unless he made a determined effort to allow time for it to develop. He counted the days since he had last seen her and was appalled at the answer. It was enough to galvanise him into activity. He slipped away from his headquarters before anyone had the opportunity to pin him down with a fresh crisis. His Pod took him through the darkening streets of Jerusalem towards her house. The recent clement conditions had brought the people out and the ancient city had an air of prosperity about it which had been sadly missing since the end of the Time of Peace.

The aura of prosperity did not raise his spirits, he knew too well, that it was an illusion. The facilities they had once enjoyed were beginning to fail. The provision of adequate power was tenuous and with the coming winter, there would be an increasing tendency for the supply to fail. The world-wide grid, which relied upon the gathering of solar energy, was interrupted here and there and starved of the clear skies upon which it relied. The Pod system lurched from one disaster to the next. On this particular evening, it was working, but its users were usually surprised to arrive at their destinations without at least one interruption to the service.

Michael was one of the lucky ones, his journey was uninterrupted. He arrived at Leah's small villa on the outskirts of the city and watched the Pod scuttle on its way to the next user. He turned to the outer gate and interrupted the recognition sensor beam which would announce his presence. The gate slid open and he entered a small courtyard. It was well tended, Leah had been busy. She was waiting for him at the main door of the house. He felt his pulse quicken.

"Greetings, Michael - I was hoping you would come this evening."

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He grinned at her.

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"Can I take encouragement from that warm welcome?"

She didn't answer, instead she led the way into the small reception room which overlooked the garden.

"I'm glad you came."

"I'm doubly encouraged - you said that before!"

A small smile flickered across her face. He went on:

"How are the children?"

"They're both well - and sleeping."

"Yes, I suppose they are - I am rather late."

"You're a busy man."

"I deserve the veiled reproach. I shouldn't be too busy to spend more time with you."

"It was a statement of fact - not a reproach."

He stared at her for a moment.

"Why are we fencing with small talk, Leah?"

She didn't answer immediately, then:

"I have been doing a lot of thinking, Michael - and I've come to a decision."

"About what?"

"The future - "

He stared at her and then found his voice.

"I hope it includes me!"

She stared at him.

"It will always include you, Michael - one way or the other."

"I don't like the sound of that!"

"An optimist would find it encouraging!"

"Do I have the right to feel optimistic? I've lost count of the number of times I've asked you to be my wife!"

She shook her head slowly.

"I haven't been very fair to you, have I?"

"Someone - and I can't remember if he was a wise man or an idiot - once said: 'All's fair in love and war'."

"You've been very patient with me, Michael."

"Now, I can't be patient any longer, Leah! Will you give me a straight answer? Will you be my wife?"

"A wife might be a hindrance to you, Michael. I could foresee the time when she might beg you to stay with her and not to go into battle against Gog and his Horde. She might plead with you to think of her first and not put yourself into danger. She might say that it isn't fair that you should stand up for your people and defend the Camp of the Saints. Think about it - It might be better if you went on alone and didn't allow yourself to be restricted by a wife who hangs around your neck!"

He stared at her relentlessly.

"Have you finished? Give me a straight answer! Will you be my wife?"

She hesitated. He jumped to his feet and held her by the shoulders.

"Do I have to shake the answer out of you?"

"I believe I'll have to think about it some more - I didn't realise you had a bullying nature!"

He shook her gently and she started to laugh.

"All right - all right - yes! Yes, Michael ben Levi, I will be your wife!"

She put her hand over his mouth before he could shout.

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"We don't want to wake the children!"

He kissed her instead, long, passionately, so that she was breathless before he let her go. She managed to ask:

"What would you have done if I had said no?"

"More of the same until you had changed your mind!"

She looked disappointed.

"I knew I should have hesitated a bit longer!"

He kissed her again. She rested against his chest and said nothing for a while. They looked out into the darkness. The moon was rising, a pale shadow of its sevenfold glory in the time of Peace, but it was enough to light the garden. She whispered:

"I'm frightened for the future, Michael. There is so little light to show us the way."

"There will always be enough for those who hold to what we were taught during the Time of Peace. Nothing can defeat us. Never fear, even if Gog was to assemble an uncountable multitude and surround us with a ring of steel, he still will not be able to overthrow the Camp of the Saints. Jerusalem is only a symbol of that holy condition - a physical expression of the deepest of spiritual truths. The Camp of the Saints comprises all those who will hold to the teachings of our God and who refuse to surrender to Satan and his general. Gog will be destroyed, but it will not be at the hand of Michael - it will be by fire from heaven! Hold fast to that truth, my darling - it IS our security!"

They sat far into the night and whispered their plans to one another. They would seek the earliest opportunity to formalise their union. It would be announced for all to know and they would wait eagerly for its sanctification at the hand of a Kingly-Priest. He returned late to his quarters, there was no suggestion that he should remain with Leah. Both were of the same mind - first the union would be sanctified and only then would they truly become husband and wife. It was the Godly way.

By the time he managed to get to sleep, it was almost dawn. For this reason, he was unusually late in rising. When he presented himself at his Administration Office, there was already a request for a holo-conference with Joshua Aristides. It was the first priority. Joshua eyed him quizzically when he emerged from the haze of the initiated link.

"Greeting, Joshua, my friend! A thousand apologies for the delay."

Joshua continued to eye him critically.

"What a difference a day makes!"

Michael managed to look puzzled.

"You'll have to explain that."

"Yesterday, you were doom and gloom - today you are - shall we say - disgustingly smug about something!"

"Yesterday, I had just had the dubious pleasure of talking to Micah Perga - today, my breakfast was more agreeable."

"I'm glad to hear it! You look as if you have just pulled off the diplomatic coup of the millennium."

"Almost, Joshua - almost, but not quite!"

"Then it must be that Leah has finally relented and you are to be congratulated!"

Michael stared at him. Joshua threw back his head and laughed. He wiped his eyes.

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"So! I am right! Congratulations to you and to Leah. I am very happy for you!"

Michael nodded.

"Thank you, Joshua - It will mean a great deal to Leah that we have your approval."

Joshua became serious.

"It could never be in any doubt, Michael! You must get it into your head that the episode between myself and Leah is ancient history - and I firmly believe it was never destined to come to anything - regardless of what my little tyrant has to say."

Michael's smile returned.

"How is your mother, Joshua?"

"Maman still sparkles with her usual determination and forthrightness, but she is so terribly weak these days. She rarely gets out of bed, but she holds court and has a steady stream of regular visitors - as many as her strength allows. She will be especially delighted when she gets to hear the news - please tell Leah that Maman and I are both very happy for you."

"I will be sure to do that."

"I think we must get down to business, my friend - hard though that must be for you in the circumstances!"

"I'll force myself, Joshua!"

"Your emissary arrived with your interesting suggestion. Luke was able to enlarge on the details in a very competent way. You are to be congratulated in finding such an able replacement for Simon. I like your idea and I have already issued instructions for it to be put into action. I think we can promise a rude surprise."

"I'm pleased, Joshua. I think it will force the issue."

"Good-bye, my friend - and once again, congratulations to Leah and yourself."

The link evaporated and Michael eased back in the chair. Everything now depended on Georgi Malenski - or upon his general Pik Sedova. He would have given much to know the true status between the two. It was a puzzling relationship, for without a doubt, Sedova had the power of his army behind him and Georgi had nothing but his earlier reputation of leading his people away from the disastrous Arctic settlements. He was the one who had some sort of mystical hold on his people, but it was Sedova who had the actual political power. Michael wondered how long it would be before Sedova decided that he had no further need for Georgi Malenski and when he had come to that decision, what the outcome would be.

It was a number of weeks before Sedova made his move. He moved out of his alpine encampment, with forty thousand men behind him and started his relentless march down the length of the Adriatic trough. There was no resistance. Those who farmed the polders retreated into the mountain vastness of the Balkans on the one hand, or into the corresponding heights of the Apennines, on the other. The polders had yielded their harvest. Sedova had timed his move to coincide with its end. He travelled light, confident that there was no one to stand in his way when he came to the makeshift storage facilities. It was then that he had his first rude shock.

The storage facilities were empty - at least, those closest to his alpine stronghold. In the encampment on that first night, he called his captains together. He questioned them with the ferocity he usually reserved for his

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victims.

"You are trying to tell me that all the facilities are empty - every one of them? There isn't one which has at least some food in it? What about the settlements? What are they doing for food?"

One responded, someone had to.

"The settlements are empty, the people saw us coming and retreated - they must have taken the supplies with them."

Sedova snarled at him.

"The harvest was good - they couldn't have carried it all away. We've moved too fast. I want some answers - a hungry army loses its edge - and Sedova's army never goes hungry! Understood?"

They understood but it was no different on the next and subsequent days. By this time, Sedova and his forward troops was already half way down the trough of the Adriatic. Strung out behind him at daily intervals, were his main force. The rearguard hadn't even started from the base camp. The fact soon came home, not one storage silo had produced enough to keep one man in rations, they had been stripped bare, swept clean. The food they had brought with them from the alpine camp was gone. For the first time that night, there were murmurings from hungry men.

In the morning light, they began their march with empty bellies. Sedova glared with disfavour at the looming heights to each side of their line of march. They were nearly at the place where they had met the forces of Micah Perga on their previous excursion. He knew it was a focal point for storage and he pinned his hopes on finding sufficient to feed his men at the end of the day. Once again, he was faced with empty silos, this time he exploded with a rage which could be heard for hundreds of meters around his tent. His captains waited for the force to expend itself - gradually Sedova's fury subsided to be replaced by a tense silence which no one dared to break. He glowered at them one after the other, as if they were personally responsible for the empty bellies.

"It will get no better tomorrow or the next day or the next. The harvest has been shifted as soon as it was brought in, probably during the nights. That calls for a plan and I doubt whether your local, average farmer would have been that clever. The question is, which way - either Alexander Barenkov has been too clever for his own comfort, or - or Joshua Aristides and his steward have stepped into the picture."

He walked to the entrance to the tent and glowered out into the setting sun, the Apennines were a black silhouette in the gathering darkness. There were no lights - there ought to have been lights from the settlements he knew were strung out along the old Italian shore and on the mountain sides beyond. He turned the other way. The Balkan mountains were still visible in the last setting rays. On that side, there were lights of settlements. He looked again at the western side of the trough before returning to his table.

"We will raid the settlements we can see to the east and strip their storehouses. It will give our fighting men something to do other than growl about the emptiness of their guts! Do it now!"

His captains melted away and Sedova was left to contemplate what the expansion of his activities would do to the delicate balance of power Georgi Malenski was trying to maintain. He heard the movement of men leaving the camp, hunger was a good spur and he knew they wouldn't return empty handed. They would bring back enough supplies to keep them going

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for a few days. He thought of men like Michael ben Levi and Joshua Aristides, machinating their designs in their far off citadels. He had no doubt that they were behind the stripping of the storehouses. He couldn't work out the purpose of their strategy. He wondered if they really thought that he would get discouraged enough to turn his men around and retreat back into the Alps. They must have calculated that he would retaliate and strike out to right and left to keep his army supplied.

It was nearly light when the first of his foragers returned. He had snatched a few hours sleep but their sound aroused him. It wasn't a jubilant homecoming, not like it had been after the tough battles they had fought on other occasions. He stepped out into the cold air of the dawn and watched them, they avoided his eyes, slouching in and dispersing quickly. Two or three of his captains made their way slowly towards him. He watched them for a moment and then retreated into the tent and waited for them to join him. They stood awkwardly and said nothing.

"Well?"

One was forced to make a report.

"They were waiting for us - "

"Of course they were waiting for you! They have eyes! They saw us camp! They knew the storehouses were empty! Did you expect them to be sleeping sweetly with their wives?"

"They attacked us as we climbed the slopes from the polders. They cut us to pieces!"

Sedova stared at them one after the other.

"I repeat! What did you expect, no resistance? So - we took some casualties, but you soon cut them down?"

The captain shook his head slowly.

"They melted away in the darkness. We moved forward into one of their towns and made for the storehouses. They were empty! We broke into the houses - the people were gone. They saw us coming and retreated into the darkness, taking everything with them and when we went after them, they attacked in small groups and then turned and ran before we could cut them down."

Sedova looked deceptively casual.

"So - you took a lot of casualties and got nothing to show for it?"

His captains nodded reluctantly.

"You are captains each of a thousand men. As from now, you will be responsible to feed your own men on a daily basis. Each captain will send a hundred men each day - and night, if necessary, to find enough supplies to feed his thousand. If you find nothing, your men will starve! If they starve, they are free to call you to account! Do I make myself understood? I think you will soon learn how to deal with these new tricks - if you don't, your men will deal with you!"

He knew the word would soon get around the camp. Of one thing he was determined, he would not be delayed in pressing forward to his objective. Hundreds of kilometres had to be covered before he reached the African shore and within reach of the rich coastal settlements under the stewardship of Micah Perga. The winter would soon return and by that time, it was essential that adequate supplies were under his control.

There was a steady flow of communiqués to Jerusalem, Nile City and Joshua's Iberian base. Each step of Sedova's march south was plotted.

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Joshua was well satisfied with the evacuation of supplies carried out by the competent Gela Licarte. He had only just been in time, but the rich harvest of the polders had been transported to the western side of the Apennines. If Pik Sedova wanted to get his hands on it, he would have to divert men across the mountains and fight the stinging counter-attacks of the small groups Michael had suggested.

Much had depended on the co-operation of Alexander Barenkov, but for the time being, he had agreed with Michael to withdraw his coastal settlements along the old Adriatic coast and to remove their provisions out of harms way. It was a matter of conjecture how long the co-operation would last - especially with Georgi Malenski working upon his brother, Anatole. Several things were still in Michael's favour. First of all, Alexander had more steel in his make-up than his brother. Secondly, his stewardship had hardly been penetrated by the flow of refugees which had almost swamped that of Anatole. Thirdly, he had never had first hand dealings with Pik Sedova, who had been scrupulous in his avoidance of incidents across the northern demarcation line of his stewardship. If he had any concerns at all, it was the knowledge that what he was doing was, without any doubt, provocative and that Pik Sedova would eventually call him to account. Another factor was that he liked Michael ben Levi as a man and admired the panache with which he faced the common enemy.

Micah Perga watched events and moved his men into the forward areas along the coast of ancient Tunisia. It wasn't lost on him that this was close to the site of the ancient city of Carthage and that an Italian invasion had eventually destroyed that great empire. The eighteen thousand men he had lost in the Adriatic polders still weighed on him. He was unpopular at home and he was well aware that another military reversal would provoke an unrest he would not be able to contain. If he was grateful for the harassment of the Sedova army by the small forces flanking the Adriatic, he didn't express it. He saw himself as standing alone and was frankly contemptuous of the minuscule efforts they were contributing on his behalf.

Georgi Malenski knew that Sedova's army was on the march. His so-called general was becoming more and more independent of his direction. The army looked to Sedova, he was the one who trained them and led them into battle. Georgi was the unknown quantity, there was a mystique about him. The rank and file knew that he wasn't like other men and around him was growing a cultus. The name of Georgi Malenski created awe - the whispers were becoming louder - this man was Gog. He was the great mystical leader who had led them out of the certain death of the Arctic winter into the lands which they now occupied. The murmur was, that he was indestructible. No man could kill him, he was controlled by forces which kept him inviolate. Lately, there had been another contribution to the cultus. He had repudiated the ties which held him to a woman. He no longer consorted with his wife, she had been sent away, together with his son. He was a man who stood alone.

Feodor watched his northern border. The ancient line of demarcation had become nothing more than a joke. It had been crossed by a steady stream of displaced farmers from Grigor Suskov's stewardship. For the moment, the newcomers were being assimilated. They had certain things in their favour. They respected the lands into which they moved. Many of them had family ties with those who farmed the border area. There was a reluctant

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absorption and little open discontent, but it wasn't a situation which could continue long before there were problems.

When he wasn't watching his northern border, or monitoring the movement of Sedova's army, he was keeping an eye on Elena and her son. It was a much more pleasant occupation. The early stiff formality had evaporated. The ice had thawed out of Georgi's wife, as if the legacy of the Siberian trek had been eradicated. Only at times would she become pensive and sad. It was almost impossible to do so in the house of Feodor Chernienko. He was young, wild and totally unlike the serious man Georgi had always been - even in the days of Peace. Feodor and Piotr had become bosom friends. The boy would accompany their host for his morning ride and soon showed that he had almost the reckless skills of a Cossack. Feodor had declared:

"What more do you expect, Elena - it's in the blood. We are cousins, after all - your ancestors came from this area. Piotr can ride because it's in his genes. I predict that he'll be the best of us all when he grows up!"

Then he saw the sadness in her face and the humour evaporated. The End of Time would come before Piotr could expect to have reached manhood. Elena saw something else in Feodor's face. It was something she knew she had to avoid, for only disaster would come from it. Feodor Chernienko was finding it very hard to disguise the fact that he was falling in love with her.

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Pik Sedova's progress to the south faltered. He was forced to divert his forces to search for provisions. His ultimatum to his captains produced some results, but the effort of diverting scavenging parties could not be sustained. He was forced to demand the airlifting of supplies from his base. Every Shuttle and transporter which could be mustered, was diverted from the task of ferrying fresh refugees into the rear areas. Because of the slow progress of the forward troops, those who had been strung out as the main force and rearguard, caught up and presented an even greater logistical problem. Into this nightmare of and confusion, Georgi Malenski materialised.

The news of his coming permeated every corner of the vast camp which had arisen in the stripped polders. His hungry and frustrated army drew breath and waited for his presence amongst them to produce a miracle.

Pik Sedova was far from pleased to receive a visitation from his nominal commander. It tended to emphasise his floundering lack of organisational ability and his credibility with his men was already at an all time low, even before the appearance of the man they called Gog. Georgi Malenski sat opposite him in the tattered tent which served as command headquarters. He sniffed the air, it smelt as bad as the camp around them. The sour smell of unwashed humanity and inadequate latrines - too many people crowded together for the facilities available, spelled trouble. Pik Sedova would be lucky if he managed to salvage half of his fighting force, if cholera or typhoid took a hold. He suggested as much in a mildly deceptive

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voice. Sedova glowered at him with barely suppressed fury.

"I'm well aware of the possibility, Georgi!"

"I'm quite sure you are - and that you will take urgent steps to protect yourself. These diseases are no respecters of persons and strike at generals as much as at the troopers! We know very little about them and next to nothing about how to combat them. Yours would not be the first army to have been wiped out before they fired a shot in anger!"

Sedova fought down his frustration which was threatening to overwhelm all caution.

"As soon as we can get moving again, the problem will pass. We need food - if I want fighting men when we reach Africa, I can't march them on empty bellies!"

Georgi nodded absently.

"Tell me, why is it so imperative to march against Africa? We are not an army of conquest - or has our objective changed? I thought we were concerned with securing and protecting vital food supplies for our displaced comrades. Is there some pressing need for a march on Africa?"

Sedova mastered his retort, but only just. His response was honey sweet.

"Georgi! Look around you! I haven't even found enough food to feed my men, let alone our displaced comrades. This is the whole point of the exercise - there are no storages closer than Africa! The local stewards have appropriated what was in the Adriatic storehouses. We started out with the objective of securing enough supplies for the winter months - our objective has been changed by the greed of Alexander Barenkov and Joshua Aristides and his steward."

Georgi looked him straight in the eye, but Sedova's glance didn't waver. Georgi asked softly:

"You took forty thousand men to secure a few dozen storage points along the Adriatic trough. Couldn't that be described as an overkill?"

"Not when you consider that when we came this way before, we were met by an army commanded by Micah Perga. You can rest assured, he hasn't been sitting on his hands after the bloody nose we gave him last time!"

Georgi shrugged.

"My agents tell me that he had a very unfavourable reaction over the loss of eighteen thousand men - your bloody nose - I doubt whether he will be quite so ready to meet you head on."

"My assessment isn't so optimistic, Georgi! What do you suggest - that I should send half of my men home? It's one way of solving the feeding problem, I suppose."

"You won't have a supply problem for much longer. You'll have all the food you need after tomorrow."

Sedova slowly bared his yellow teeth in a broad grin.

"I knew you would come to the party, Georgi!"

Malenski nodded.

"Your progress is too slow on foot - time's running out - the weather's on the turn. When you're supplied, move your advance troops by Transporter and Shuttle to each storage point down the trough and then use them to ferry supplies. I suspect you'll find the storehouses stripped. If you're so hell bent on securing the African storehouses, don't allow yourself to be diverted by sending foraging parties to right and left. Move fast and strike hard!"

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Sedova's smile faded, it was replaced by something indefinable.

"You're becoming quite the strategist, Georgi. You've never used that sort of language before."

Malenski paused for a moment.

"Once I was a man of peace - but too much has happened for me remain the idealist. Those I thought were men of peace, have shown their teeth against the cries of the hungry and dispossessed. My answer has to be that I can't be anything other than what I am forced to be!"

Sedova eyed him without speaking. Georgi was even more gaunt than when he had last seen him. The emaciated look was intensified. It was almost as if he had given up eating, until the last of his followers were adequately fed and housed. Of course, the rumours were flying around that Elena had left him and taken his son with her. In a way, it was to be expected. Georgi Malenski was becoming something that no woman could be expected to live with. Sedova knew the whispers which were circulating amongst those of his men with the most vivid imagination. Georgi Malenski was becoming something more than a man. Pik Sedova felt the first stirrings of something more than apprehension - it approached awe, but it also contained fear.

Reports concerning the progress of Pik Sedova came slowly to Michael in Jerusalem. It was a matter of logistics. It had been difficult to infiltrate the army in the alpine base camp, it was well nigh impossible to do so once they were on the move. Michael had to rely on reports provided by scouts sent out by Gela Licarte and to a lesser extent, Alexander Barenkov. It was another of Michael's concerns, Alexander's enthusiasm was blowing hot and cold with every fresh encounter with Sedova's foraging parties. Despite the restricted information, the general pattern began to emerge. Sedova had been forced to a standstill. He had the main portion of his army cluttered into an untidy camp sprawled over the rolling polders of the Adriatic sea bed. It was a recipe waiting to mature into a nightmare of disease and death.

It took some time for additional reports to suggest that Georgi Malenski had joined his general. It accompanied communiqués which told of a huge convoy of Transporters and Shuttles - which had been confiscated from Anatole Barenkov - working back and forth, to and from the alpine camp. The next reports were of more concern. The forward movement had begun once again, this time, in the form of an airlift. Not only was Sedova on the move again, but it was at a much accelerated pace. In a very short time, they had reached the shores of the Eastern Basin and were securing the ancient heel of the Italian peninsular.

Michael didn't indulge in a fruitless succession of holo-conferences with his allies, or with Micah Perga, whom he did not consider an ally but a fellow Administrator under threat. He was quite certain that Micah and Joshua were adequately informed about the situation. Quite apart from that, the holo-link was no longer confidential. It was the last choice of medium to use for the purpose of planning strategy.

His plans for marriage to Leah had taken a second priority. It was frustrating but unavoidable. There was one other factor which was beyond their control. They both wanted their union to be sanctified by a Kingly Priest. It was a simple fact that they were obliged to be patient until one chose to make himself available.

The securing of the heel of Italy marked the midpoint of the advance of Sedova's army. It was a time to build up morale. The ferrying of troops and

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supplies had actually placed them ahead of schedule. They had climbed out of the depression of the reclaimed sea bed and stormed the higher land which comprised the 'heel' and were then able to look out towards their goal of the African coast. Some of the more ignorant were disappointed because it was not to be seen. Their spur had been that once they were free of the accursed depression, they would be on the threshold of their goal. It was yet another reason to have a festivity and get their minds on to something else.

Georgi Malenski stood alone on the brow of a low hill and stared out over the semicircle of reclaimed land which had been won from the old Gulf of Tarranto. It would be necessary to ferry the army over the deeper waters which had not been reclaimed and then on, to the toe of Calabria. He turned and looked out over the Eastern Basin. It was empty of ships, he knew that was unusual, this area had one of the busiest clusters of trade routes, crossing each other between the various ports of the African and European shores - and even to the new coast of the Holiest of all Lands.

He was aware of the approach of Pik Sedova without seeing or hearing him. The man moved like a cat and was endowed with the same ability to pounce on his prey when the moment was right. Malenski had little doubt that one day he would be the target. Elena had been right about him - she had been right about many things. He felt the bile of frustration rise in his mouth. He said, without turning:

"There is our path for tomorrow!"

Sedova laughed.

"There'll be no way forward tomorrow, Georgi - not even you can manage that. The men won't be swayed with fine words after tonight's activities. Tomorrow, all they'll be fit for is sleeping it off!"

He drew along side his leader and glanced at him.

"Not to your taste, I think? You might be wise to make it to your taste, Georgi. If the men think you're a shade better than them, you might lose some of your edge. Even a god-figure has to show human qualities!"

Malenski turned his head slowly and met the mocking gaze of his general. Sedova nodded.

"Yes, Georgi, I said 'god-figure'. I don't care whether you choose call yourself Gog or whether you choose to hide from the possibility - but that's what they call you! Come down to the world of men, Georgi! You walk too high for the rest of us. They say you can't be killed, they say you have a destiny which makes you invincible! Remember something - it takes one thrust of a dagger when you walk alone, to prove that idea wrong - and there will always be someone who will trade his life for a few minutes of glory, to show the rest of us how misguided we were about you!"

They walked back down the hill into the camp. Malenski watched the faces of the men they passed. He read their expressions and knew that the watching cat was right. Sedova was baiting his trap, he could trust nothing the man said and that included the invitation to join in the revelry around the campfires. Not by choice, but because there was little other alternative, he sat with Sedova and his senior captains and ate sparingly of the food set in front of him. There was plenty for all. It was heaped in great platters on the ground, within the circles of men sprawled in relaxation. There was plenty to drink too, mostly the crude alcohol they prepared for themselves out of barley or potatoes. Malenski felt a mild resentment at the casual attitude they displayed towards the food. A few days previously they had been on the point

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of mutiny because of their hunger - now, supplies were plentiful again and food was thrown down half eaten, to be ground into the dirt.

He knew Sedova was watching him, the mountain cat stalking his prey. The scrutiny didn't unnerve him, Pik Sedova had no part to play in his destiny. He would serve out his part in the grand scheme and would as quickly be removed - for the moment, he was needed - the time would come when he could be discarded. His general called across to him.

"Georgi - we have some entertainment for you - I think you might appreciate it - in the circumstances."

There was a momentary hush in the chatter of those in the immediate vicinity. It was accompanied by an almost fearless anticipation of his reaction. Georgi schooled himself to remain impassive apart from a silent nod of acknowledgement. The chatter resumed and even heightened a little. Sedova gestured to one of his aides and almost immediately, into the cleared ring of ground around the great fire, a troop of women appeared. Georgi stared at them without change of expression. They were the whores who followed the army.

There followed an inept shuffle around the fire, which raised roars of approval from the onlookers. Malenski looked at the faces of the audience and knew that the baser elements of men's nature had not been eradicated under the educating influence of the Teachers in the Time of Peace. It had become dormant, but it had only taken the release of Satan to once more stir it into activity. He could have been looking on a scene which would have been repeated in every army which followed a leader, who promised to lead them to the glory of conquest. It confirmed what he had known for a long time. He would be thrown down on the Plain of Esdraelon, but not because of Michael ben Levi - it would be the wrath of the Almighty God!

The excitement grew as the dance became wilder, more abandoned. Malenski sat rigidly, impassively aloof from the almost palpable aura of sensual excitement. Sedova watched him and a slow grin grew, he leaned forward and shouted into Malenski's ear.

"This is tame compared with what they can do, Georgi - you should see some of the tricks the Scandians have brought with them - "

Malenski turned and looked at him steadily. His face was still expressionless. He said nothing, Sedova eased back, but he maintained the mocking smile. Georgi rose and walked out of the circle of the fires. Some might have noticed his exit, but most were engrossed with the increasingly orgiastic activities illuminated by the billowing flames.

Early on the following morning, he left his tent and picked his way through the twitching forms of those who had fallen to the ground where they had revelled. The noise and commotion of the previous night had continued into the early hours. He had laid on his bedroll and had stared at the flickering firelight reflected through the thin walls of his tent. There had been no sleep, but strangely, in the early light, he did not feel tired. He sometimes wondered where his reserves of stamina originated.

He took his Shuttle out over the clear waters of the southern ocean. He had no particular objective in doing so, other than to be free of the stinking camp in which his followers slept off their excesses. He looked down at the smooth, empty waters. The cargo fleets were being kept well away. They knew that Gog was coming and they were giving him room. He was quite sure that every move he made was being signalled to Michael Ben Levi

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and his allies and that counter measures were being initiated as required.

He had taken the Shuttle far out over the Ionian Basin, on an impulse, he pointed its nose to the west, towards the Calabrian shore. The polders of the reclaimed coastal area rushed towards him. He turned slightly to his left and followed their line towards his army's next objective. The mountainous plateau of Sicily loomed out of the morning mist, with the lowlands of the old sea bed stretching out to the Malta mount.

He surveyed the terrain below and came to a quick decision - The Malta mount was not the way to go. The land bridge to Africa lay further to the west, with Pantalleria rising like a craggy tower amidst the morass of shallow salt lagoons and shifting sands, which lay between the fully reclaimed polders on the Sicilian and Tunisian sides. He felt a surge of apprehension. It would not be a good place to be trapped - or to face a determined enemy ready to die to protect the storages on the African side. He wondered again about the resolve of Micah Perga and his army. It was to be hoped that it would crumble away at the sight of the ferocious warriors led by Pik Sedova.

It was time to return and try to salvage something from the day. He took another route, one which led over the Sicilian plateau. Below him, there was evidence of intensive farming. It was good land which had just yielded its harvest. The storehouses ought to have been filled to overflowing, but he doubted if the resourceful Gela Licarte had left too much to entice a raid by the encroaching army. The looming Etna massif blocked his path. He set his course for the smoking crater which had returned to life with the release of Satan. It had been quiescent for a thousand years, whether there was some lesson to be learned from the fact that it had now returned to life and that the magma pool in the crater looked like the mouth of hell, was open to interpretation.

Another volcano smoked out in the sea to the north of the ancient island - Stromboli - and beyond that, almost in a straight line of flight, the hidden caldera of Vesuvius. He was reminded of the meeting with Michael, Joshua, and Micah Perga. They had gone through the mockery of a solemnly signed agreement. Each had pledged to agree to disagree, but each had known that the other practised deception. Perhaps the greatest deception of all was to imagine that there could ever be any peace between them. They were set upon an unchangeable course which would eventually lead to the last great battle. In a former age, the superstitious would have said that it was written in the stars. In their time, there was a far more telling commitment. Armageddon was written into the prophecies of the Time of the End.

He took a direct line from Etna to his army's camp. Even from the air it had a depressing aspect, an untidy sprawl of shelters and fire circles, men lounging in whatever shade they could find, no effort being made to continue the march. Sedova had said that no amount of fine words would get them moving today. Malenski didn't bother to try, but he was determined that it would not be the same on the next day.

Another event took a hand, which acted as the spur. It was something totally outside of his control. Just as the sun was starting to set and before a repeat of the previous evening's revelry could start again, there were a number of co-ordinated attacks on the perimeter of straggling tent lines. Fire arrows were shot into the tattered cloth shelters and soon, there were a number of fires blazing out of control, which threatened to sweep through the

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camp like a wildfire. Those who tried to douse the flames, found themselves the target of more arrows shot from the security of the surrounding woods. Chaos reigned until the captains could restore some sort of discipline and order. By this time, the attackers had fled. Sedova met with his captains, white with fury. Georgi Malenski looked on silently.

Sedova vented his wrath on his luckless subordinates. One who dared to question his wild accusations was felled with one blow. If Malenski hadn't been present, he would probably have been killed by his incensed general. The man looked across at Malenski and read a hint of silent sympathy. It wasn't lost on Sedova, who rounded on the silent onlooker.

"Don't waste your sympathy on him, dear brother Georgi! I suppose you have the perfect solution to all our problems?"

The captains watched silently. Malenski remained seated. He answered quietly.

"This is not the first time you have thrown down a challenge to me, dear brother Sedova! To answer your question - yes, I do have a solution - whether it is perfect or not, will remain to be seen. My solution is to impose a little discipline in your army and instead of blaming your captains for every ill, look to see what the general can do better! From the air, this camp looks what it is - a brothel! It has been pitched far too close to the forest and so, provides perfect cover for the smallest force which wishes to attack us. You indulge the men in their vices and so, there are no sentries. You squander food and supplies - enough lays on the ground to feed a thousand men, women and children for a week during the Siberian trek."

The silence was almost palpable. The captains had stopped breathing. Malenski didn't drop his gaze in the face of Sedova's relentless glare. He watched the fury rising to the point of explosion. It was an explosion which did not come to maturity. Sedova breathed:

"Perhaps you would like to instruct the captains in their duties, my dear brother Georgi?"

Malenski's eyes did not waver.

"You will post sentries on the outer perimeter. The men are well rested, they have been lazing all day - you will instruct them to draw back the lines of the camp from the forest edge - it will give them something to do other than thinking of the women who follow the camp. Let it be known that we move out at first light and who isn't prepared to move at that time, will be left to deal with our attackers. I want the whole army assembled at the Pantellaria mount within two days!"

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By the end of the second day, the army had been ferried to the westernmost tip of the old island of Sicily. Malenski was well satisfied with the effort. Sedova's captains had applied themselves creditably, reasserting the

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discipline which their general had allowed to slip. As for Sedova himself, he remained sullenly compliant. Georgi was under no illusions that it would last. Pik Sedova had drawn back from the inevitable showdown. There could be only one conclusion, he was waiting for Malenski to make a slip. He was waiting for some miscalculation which would discredit the man in the eyes of his followers. The man whom they were openly describing as Gog.

Sedova watched every move Malenski made and listened intently to every direction. He could see no reason why this man inspired awe, he was commonplace, a bureaucrat - an Administrator's pawn. He was no military genius, yet he seemed to have an instinctive feel of what should be done. It might be a different thing when he was confronted with command decisions in the heat of battle. Sedova was content to wait, the battles would come soon enough. The army was poised on one side of the tidal morass which separated Europe from Africa. It was a stretch of one hundred and twenty kilometres between the line of the old coasts. The centre portion was barely drained and in severe weather, the waters of the Western and Eastern basins of the old Great Sea, still tried to reunite as once they had, before the Gibraltar Dam had been built.

It was an area to test the resolve and abilities of any commander and Sedova was convinced that Malenski would not prove up to the task of bringing his men through as a fighting force. In the centre of the treacherous stretch stood the towering escarpments of Pantellaria. Micah Perga would have seen to it that they were fortified and manned with the best of his men.

It was already late in the evening of the second day, with the sun almost gone beyond the expanse of the Western Basin. The air was still and those within the camp sweated to make it habitable for the overnight bivouac. Sedova glanced at the sky and didn't like what he saw. It was a sullen, brazen colour, ominous, threatening, although there was no evidence of a storm - not yet! He smelt it, one was coming and the camp was unprotected, open to driving winds and rain. Perhaps, this was the beginning of the miscalculations for which he was waiting.

The men were strangely quiet around the fires that evening. It might have had something to do with the ruthless way Malenski had driven the whores from the camp two days earlier. At his direction, they had been physically removed, spitting and struggling and giving a hard time to the luckless warriors assigned to the task. Perhaps, after all, that had been the beginning of his mistakes. Only now, were the men beginning to feel resentment.

Malenski seemed impervious to every current of feeling. He sat cross-legged at the fire circle and ate his rations slowly. The captains were grouped around him and Sedova sat next to him. Malenski hadn't tried to diminish Sedova's authority with the captains after the confrontation, but he had done nothing to build it up either. Sedova was accepted as being the army commander, but in some undefinable way, it was now Malenski who had become the leader. The captains were awaiting orders for the next day, none were forthcoming - and not one dared to put the question: Would they move against the African shore?

As was usual, Malenski rose from his place early and without a word. He walked alone through the camp. Sedova had to give him a grudging respect, the man had courage of a sort. Some of the men were very sore at being deprived of their comforts; some of them were sore enough to kill.

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Malenski seemed impervious to the danger, perhaps it was this which gave him an aura of invincibility and set the tongues whispering again.

He walked out of the camp and climbed the low line of dunes which skirted the ancient shore. Reclaimed land stretched most of the way to Pantellaria from where he was standing, but it stopped short of the mount. From that point, for twenty kilometres further, was the hazardous area filled with quicksands and tidal surges which could trap a hundred men in the matter of minutes and swallow them as if they had never existed. He knew this was his greatest test. The alternative was to ferry the men across by Shuttle and Transporter, but if they met determined resistance, they could be wiped out as soon as they set foot on the further shore. He had to make the decision.

The sky to the west was a lurid red and the stifling heat of the atmosphere had intensified. He saw the start of the electrical storm far out over the Western Basin and watched as it became more sharply defined. There was no doubt it was moving in their direction. A well known, sneering voice behind him asked the question.

"Well, Georgi - do we put the storm down to divine intervention? Are the heavenly powers taking a hand in our little enterprise?"

Malenski didn't turn, he concentrated on the approaching storm.

"We will not be stopped by a storm, brother Sedova - not on this occasion. There will be other factors which will save the King of the South!"

The mocking smile slipped from Sedova's lips and once again, he felt a chill of fear. He tried another attack.

"The captains were waiting for instructions - you gave them none."

"Tomorrow, they will be given instructions - it will be time enough. Now - I think we had better get back to our tents before the storm strikes."

He didn't wait for his general to respond, instead, he slithered down the soft sand of the dune and then strode swiftly back to the camp. Sedova followed, the glowering hatred on his face was unmasked as he eyed his leader's back.

The storm struck with sudden fury about two hours later and there was a great deal of work to be done in driving rain and howling wind, before the tents of those who had neglected to fasten them down correctly, were secured. Most of them spent a wakeful and wet night, watching the wind tug at the thin walls and trying to keep themselves and their equipment away from the streamlets of water which seeped under the edges. It was still driving with rain when it became light.

Malenski had slept well. He ate his morning rations and listened to the complaints of his captains silently. Most told the same story of men soaked to the skin, of tents torn from their moorings, of soaked rations and clothing. He looked up momentarily, as the huge bulk of Sedova blocked the tent entrance. Nothing was said, the silence was eloquent enough.

During the morning, the weather eased. Malenski walked the camp and silently took a hand helping one or the other to stabilise his tent. He went from one group to the next, talking with them quietly. It was mid-afternoon before he returned to his quarters. One of his captains was waiting for him - it was the one who had been felled by Sedova's fist a few night's earlier. The colour of the bruise and the swelling was subsiding. Malenski nodded to him.

"Greetings Nicholai Gubkin - I think I am right - you joined me on the march to the Urals?"

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He was rewarded with a flush of pleasure.

"I am surprised you remember me, brother Malenski."

"I thought it was you I recognised the other evening."

He left the circumstances unspoken.

"So - brother Gubkin, do you have a particular problem?"

The man shuffled and appeared unable to make up his mind whether to open his mouth or keep it shut. Malenski turned to the small table and a sheaf of communiqués which awaited his decisions.

"You perhaps wish to tell me that I am surrounded by danger and that there are those who wish to do me harm and that I should take greater security measures and not walk alone amongst those who have followed me from the Arctic?"

Gubkin swallowed and then blurted out.

"It is true that the camp holds many who followed you from the Arctic or who joined you during the Siberian march but - but there are others who did not have that - advantage."

"You choose a strange word - advantage - what advantage was there for the hundreds of thousands who died along the way - whose corpses still litter the road which Georgi Malenski chose to take? You see, I can choose my words as well - I would not choose the word advantage."

"It was an advantage for those who travelled with you, brother Malenski. Those who joined us later - the scum of Scandians who first butchered our comrades and then became our friends, they have no love for you. It is those you must watch - and you must watch the others - those who turned them from enemies into allies with the promise of riches. Those who planned this mission for the loot they could win in Nile City - it isn't only for food that we go to Africa!"

Malenski looked up and met Gubkin's eyes. They didn't falter.

"Explain your meaning, Nicholai."

"I can't make it plainer, brother Georgi. Those who planned this mission had the objective of pushing on to the rich cities of Egypt - Nile City, Old Alexandria - you name them. They are to be sacked and burnt! The storehouses are a secondary objective. The intention is to collect enough produce on the way back, to satisfy the needs of the camp and perhaps, give a surplus into the general supply."

Malenski continued to hold his gaze.

"Sedova planned this?"

Gubkin hesitated and ran his tongue over suddenly dry lips. He nodded.

"Yes, brother Georgi!"

Malenski turned and walked to the entrance of the tent. There was no one close enough to have overheard the conversation. He turned back

"Where do the other captains stand on this - are they all with Sedova?"

"No more than three - the others had no choice but to go along - until."

"Until?"

"Until you came."

Malenski walked back to the table.

"Talk to the captains you can trust, Gubkin - be sure of them before you speak and then tell them that I know - do you understand? For the moment, that will be enough. They will know when the time is ripe for me to take action!"

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Gubkin left him and Malenski thought over what he had been told. It explained a lot. It explained Sedova's determination to attack Africa once more, despite the fact that there were storehouses much closer, along the Italian peninsula and in the stewardship of Alexander Barenkov. It explained the bad generalship which would have extended their lines of supply and communication to such a perilous extent. He left the tent and looked up at the sky. The cloud was breaking and on the next day, they would be able to resume the march. It was time for an aerial reconnoitre.

He took his Shuttle out over the polders which were the start of the land bridge. They looked swamped with water but he was confident they would drain enough for the army not to be bogged. The mount of Pantellaria would have spotted his Shuttle on their scanners and his position would have been reported. They would know it was him, for the signature of his ship was as individual as a fingerprint. There was no sign of activity from the fortress. Micah Perga's forces were content to observe and note and await the onslaught. He turned eastward and swung wide of the silent mountain, beyond was the morass of tidal waters.

The heavy rain would have raised the general level of both basins. It would take time for the great pumps on the Nile delta and those at the Gibraltar dam, to relieve the excess. It was as he had expected, the lower levels of the nominal bridge was swamped with surface water. It was still possible to wade through, but the treacherous shifting sands, not to mention the eddies of currents which flowed from one basin to the other, would snatch even the strongest man and he would drown before his comrades could reach him.

He looped around the southern extremity of Pantellaria and headed out over the Western basin. The previously empty waters were alive with shipping. It was impossible to accept that they were all engaged in commerce. One fact soon became evident, they were all sailing in the same direction - towards the land bridge. Malenski threw back his head and laughed, his own voice bounced off the metal surfaces of the cabin. He recited a verse he knew so well - how could it be otherwise?

'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.'

He whispered into the empty air:

"Are you ready to receive my fury, Michael ben Levi - and you, Joshua Aristides - I have already taken note of those who will forsake your Covenant!"

He turned the Shuttle and headed back to the camp. His decision was already made, but he would force Sedova to confront the reality of what faced them. He would be the one to order the army to turn about and abandon the reckless enterprise which could now only end in disaster. He landed the Shuttle and walked into the camp, directly to Sedova's fire circle. He stepped into it and stood two paces from his lounging general. Sedova looked at him warily. He growled unconvincingly.

"A pleasant surprise, brother Georgi - that you should decide to join

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us."

He had three or four of the captains with him. Malenski assumed they were the ones Gubkin had mentioned. Two were unmistakably Scandian - huge, blond fellows who looked as if they had stepped from an ancient reproduction of their Viking ancestors. There was little deference in their gaze. He had no doubt that they only awaited Sedova's decision to rebel. Malenski saw Gubkin and a half dozen fellow captains beyond the circle. They were paying close attention to what was happening. Malenski came to the point.

"You complained earlier that our captains had not received directions. Perhaps you and your fellow captains would join me for a short trip in the Shuttle - then, you can make your decision!"

"Can't it wait, Georgi - it's nearly dark?"

Sedova's response was almost like a father chiding his fractious child.

"There will be light enough for you to form your wise decisions."

Malenski didn't wait for their agreement, he turned and walked out of the circle towards Gubkin and his companions. He sensed Sedova's hesitation and then the reluctant concurrence, as he and his followers got to their feet. Malenski addressed Gubkin and his fellow captains.

"You had better come too, I want as many of the captains as possible to have a part in the decision!"

A dozen men followed him into the Shuttle and silently took their places around the walls. He lifted off and made quick time towards Pantellaria. He smiled grimly as he sensed their tension, they didn't like flirting with the enemy fortress. He said nothing as he swept low over the flooded central section of the land bridge. There was a general murmur and a few lurid curses. He turned out towards the oncoming fleet. The moon had risen, and there was light enough to see its extent. This time the comments and curses were louder. He returned to the camp site and landed. He turned to face them.

"I think a decision is indicated, brother Sedova. What are your conclusions?"

His general bared yellow teeth in an unattractive smile.

"I've seen nothing to change our plans, brother Malenski. What are your conclusions?"

Malenski's reply was deceptively mild.

"You are the man with military experience. You must make the ultimate decision whether to commit our men to wading across the tidal currents, risking an attack by superior forces from Pantellaria and the African shore - not to mention the fleet which will be in position by the morning."

Sedova shook his head mockingly.

"Don't tell me that you're frightened by an army of ghosts, brother Georgi. I thought better of you than that. Where is this mighty host who are supposed to be ready to annihilate us? I haven't seen one of them shake his spear in our direction - have you brother captains?"

The Scandians responded on cue, the rest looked more doubtful. Sedova jeered at them.

"Are you frightened by a few empty ships and a silent mountain - or an ghost army waiting behind the sand dunes on the other side? Perhaps you are right, Georgi Malenski, these men need more training before we send them into battle - perhaps we should go back!"

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Malenski eyed him steadily.

"Is that your considered decision, brother Sedova? Are our men too little trained to fight the tidal currents, the quicksands, the enemy parties from Pantellaria, the hostile forces on the approaching fleet - before they take on the main force Micah Perga has assembled on the African side?"

Sedova's smile faded to a snarl.

"The men are trained well enough, they can do it!"

Malenski nodded.

"I'm reassured by your confidence. I had the thought that forty thousand men would not be enough - I thought that we might succeed with ten times that number, especially if we have to fight our way back and perhaps meet a reinforced army along the road to our base camp. I have no doubt that Joshua Aristides is reinforcing his garrisons and we have no idea of how well his men are trained. We might have a tough fight to return through Sicily and Italy. We met little to no resistance coming here, but I think it will be a different story on the way home!"

Sedova sneered in his face.

"So - our mighty leader is suggesting that we run back with our tails between our legs, because we have seen a little muddy water and a few ships which might or might not carry an army - not to mention the army of ghosts led by Micah Perga!"

Malenski's answer was deceptively mild.

"I make no suggestions - I merely put the facts before you as I see them. You are the men who are practised in warfare - I am simply someone who has learned to calculate all the risks and knows how to use the resources available - but I also know when not to use resources, especially when the outcome is doubtful."

Sedova was silent, Malenski could see the mental wheels turning. Eventually his general snarled:

"Call all the captains together - let's see what they have to say!"

Malenski shrugged.

"Most of them are here - they have heard what we have had to say - as you so rightly pointed out earlier, they need a decision."

Sedova glowered at him.

"And what are we to decide, dear brother Georgi?"

Malenski considered it quietly.

"The decision is simply this, dear brother Pik. Knowing the risks and the unknown strength of the enemy and knowing the long drawn-out lines of communication with our base and knowing the slender resources we have, do we go on, or do we return? With forty thousand men, can we hope to conquer what is before us, or will the bulk of our army die before they reach Africa? I think it is a simple question which is answered with yes or no!"

Sedova got to his feet and towered over them.

"I say, we go on - who is with me?"

His Scandian allies rose, albeit a little uneasily. Gubkin and the remaining captains remained seated and silent. Sedova glared at them and at Malenski. His face twisted into something which was supposed to be a smile.

"It seems that we go back!"

Malenski nodded quietly.

"Unless you choose to go on alone - with those men who decide to follow you. That is also your choice, brother Sedova!"

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Sedova laughed sourly.

"A choice which is no choice, my dear Georgi. I am not a fool and a few hundred men will be wiped out very easily by your superior enemy forces. No! We will return with you - and we will explain the reasons why we have come home empty handed!"

So it was, that Michael Ben Levi and his allies received the report that the army which Georgi Malenski and his general, Sedova, had taken to the southern extremity of Europe, had turned back and retraced their path to the base camp at the southern end of the Adriatic trough. The second excursion to confront the King of the South was over, but now they had to expect the aftermath.

### 32.

Within ten days, the guests had started to gather in Jerusalem for the Sanctification of the Union between Michael ben Levi and Leah Steinbecker. A steady stream of arrivals flowed into the Salt Sea Terminal and Luke Belin had been kept busy receiving them on behalf of Michael and his bride. Michael himself was reluctant to leave his Secretariat, even for the few hours each of the greetings would have taken. He monitored every report of the movements of what he stubbornly still referred to as 'the Malenski group' and tried to second guess what they would do next.

One of the first guests to arrive had been Anatole Barenkov - the alacrity with which he had accepted the invitation had been rather a surprise, but his early arrival had all the signs of an escape from the scrutiny of Malenski's overseer. It was from Anatole that Michael learned for sure, that Georgi had been with the army which had been transported down the length of the Adriatic polders and along the southern Italian coastline to the western tip of Sicily. It followed therefore, that the abrupt turn around of the army and its transportation back to the entrance to the Adriatic trough, had been initiated by Malenski and not Sedova. Without any additional information, it could only be supposition, but it gave a hint of some conflict between the two leaders.

Alexander Barenkov and Feodor Chernienko had been the next to arrive, two days later. Feodor had brought unexpected guests - Elena Malenski and Piotr. He had explained to the startled Luke Belin that in his absence, he could hardly leave her unprotected at his Kharkov headquarters. He didn't spell out the pressing need for protection which had necessitated the heavily pregnant woman to make such a tiring journey.

The last to arrive was Joshua Aristides, his late arrival had been explained as being his natural anxiety to ensure that whoever made the decisions within the Malenski force, did not change their mind about discretion being better than foolhardy valour. He looked tired and worn when he arrived and was immediately ushered into Michael's office. They embraced silently and then Michael stepped back and eyed him critically.

"You look exhausted, Joshua."

"I have been keeping an eye on the wanderings of Gog's Horde - and

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that doesn't allow for much sleep. It isn't the only reason though - Maman is far from well. I was quite reluctant to leave her, even for so important an occasion as yours and Leah's wedding - but she insisted, and you are well aware that Maman always gets her way!"

"Leah and I appreciate you being here, Joshua - we were both hoping your mother could make the journey."

Joshua shook his head.

"Unfortunately, that would not have been wise."

Michael gestured to a chair and they both sat facing each other. Joshua smiled gently.

"Do I begin to see signs of the nervous bridegroom - or is there some other reason for your restlessness?"

"We will call it that, Joshua. Latest reports show signs of activity from the Malenski group."

"Why do you persist in calling them that, my friend? We are dealing with Gog and his Horde - it must be obvious to you by now. Georgi Malenski is leading his people in the pattern foretold in scriptures. I think we can no longer doubt that we are dealing with those events."

Michael didn't answer immediately, then:

"I suppose you are right - but tell me - which of the two is Gog - Georgi Malenski, or Pik Sedova?"

Joshua shrugged slightly.

"Does it matter? Gog's Horde is Gog's Horde and Gog leads it. I predict that his identity will become plain before very long."

Michael murmured.

"I would give a great deal to know how things stand between Georgi and his general."

"Once again, I ask you: Is that really important? The resolution is out of your hands and out of mine. No one can affect the outcome of that relationship."

Michael nodded.

"You have been informed that Feodor has brought Elena with him - and Piotr?"

Joshua nodded.

"Luke told me - I must say that I was immediately apprehensive. The implications of having Georgi's wife and son under your roof are much the same as if you had thrown down a gauntlet in challenge - but once again, I must say that it must be pre-ordained and the outcome is known."

Michael eyed him quickly.

"You have become very fatalistic, Joshua. As I remember, you were once a notorious sceptic on the subject of the inflexibility of God's promises."

"Perhaps we are all called upon to become fatalists, Michael. After all, current events have shown us that nothing can alter what has to take place. Gog will come with his Horde. You must stand up for your people. Armageddon will occur - the aftermath is pre-ordained. Nothing is negotiable - as you say, God's will is inflexible!"

"Are you trying to tell me that coming events should not concern us - we should just allow Gog to do as he must?"

"Gog must do what he is inspired to do - and we must do what we are inspired to do - we all realise that Gog will take certain initiatives and that we will be activated to try to do something to stop him. If you like, our reaction

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and defiance will become the spur which will lead him to the Plain of Esdraelon.

I point to our recent little skirmish as an example - the King of the West had to send his ships - there was no alternative - and Gog had to turn about and suffer a rebuff. His attention has been pointed elsewhere."

Michael nodded.

"The latest reports I have received indicate that he has indeed turned his attention elsewhere - namely, the Balkan peninsula. It would appear to be his next target."

"Did you expect otherwise? To all intents and purposes, Georgi has practically occupied Anatole's stewardship. It is an indisputable fact that his refugees are flowing into Feodor's area. The Balkans are the next logical step. I know I do not have to remind you of what comes after the rebuff. Quote:

'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.'

That isn't the end, Michael, although the meaning is a little obscure. It goes on:

'Armed forces dispatched by him will desecrate the sanctuary and the citadel and do away with the regular offering. And there will be set up the "abominable thing that causes desolation"

The scripture continues:

'He will win over by plausible promises those who are ready to condemn the Covenant, but the people who are faithful to their God will hold firm and fight back. Wise leaders of the nation will give guidance to the common people; yet for a while they will fall victim to fire and sword, to captivity and pillage. But these victims will not want for help, though small, even if many who join them are insincere. Some of these leaders will themselves fall victim for a time so that they may be tested, refined, and made shining white. Yet there will still be an end to the appointed time.'"

"You know that passage by heart it seems, so do I - I've read it over and over again - You are right, it isn't easy to understand. Of one thing we can be sure, we face a time of trouble which is beyond our imagination."

"But we will prevail, Michael! Let us not forget that important fact - we will prevail! We would have cause for concern if we had to rely on our own strength, but we must never forget that we instruments in God's hand and it is to Him that the final victory will fall!"

Michael stared at him and then laughed a little shakily.

"I wish we weren't separated by so many kilometres, Joshua. It would be good to have you around when my knees start to shake."

Joshua arched his brows.

"Michael, the great Prince, who shall stand up for his people - his knees shake? Impossible! You need no one but your God, my friend! Trust in Him as you have always trusted - and even more so, for we are engaged in His undertaking and we cannot possibly do anything but succeed!"

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"I know you are right, Joshua - but I think of the cost - the innocent lives which will be lost and the injuries and dispossession which must occur before it is finished. I feel heartsick when I visualise it."

Joshua leaned forward.

"Remember one thing, Michael. This is the Time of the End. We are so busy thinking about Gog and his Horde that we are in serious danger of being diverted from the main issue. Gog is the instrument which Satan uses to attract those who declare themselves for the Evil One. Gog is the instrument which determines the sifting of the sheep from the goats, prior to the Judgement Day. We haven't yet seen the extent of Gog's endowment from Satan.

Do you remember the thirteenth Chapter of the Book of Revelation? There we can read that after the First Resurrection and coinciding with the beginning of the Time of Destruction, the Dragon endowed a Beast which rose from the sea, with his powers. In much the same way, Satan has already endowed Gog with the power to draw men away from God. He has given him the tools to perform this most despicable of all tasks. These power of these tools will be shown to us as we live through the terror of the coming days.

I know it is sad to think that many will die at the hand of Gog because of their use - but they will die as innocents and will stand in confidence before the Judgement Throne. Those of Gog's forces who die, will already have cast their lot with Satan. It is they who are mentioned as being the ones who shall resurrect to everlasting contempt. Remember always, that no matter what the outcome of the Battle of Armageddon, there will come the time soon after, when we will all be called to account.

We are engaged in a mighty work, in a titanic battle with Satan for the souls of men. We must be victorious - it cannot be otherwise!"

It was time to join the other. They locked arms and walked to where they were gathered. Leah felt a lump rise in her throat when she saw the demonstration of unity. She rose to greet Joshua.

"Greetings, Joshua. It is good to see you again."

He took her hands and raised them to his lips.

"Greetings, Leah - I am so glad that you have found happiness with this man. I must say, he took his time, but in the end he has managed to stop falling over his own feet!"

Leah laughed, it was good to be free of any restrictions with the man she once thought she could never live without. She saw him through different eyes - almost as a father figure instead of a potential husband. It was quite a shock to realise that he was only a few years different in age to Marcus. The thought came unbidden. Had she seen Marcus as a husband - or as a father figure? It was a question she didn't care to answer.

She glanced across to Michael and found his eyes on her. They radiated love and protection and she felt it a little hard to breath. She knew she was happy. For the first time in years, she was really free of all the tensions which had soured her life. She refused to think of what the future would bring. There would be time enough to concern herself with those things after she was united to the man who gazed on her with such devotion.

Elena watched them both. She had taken a seat towards the back of the room, a little outside of the circle to which she did not belong. Feodor was close by, his nearness raised her tension. The depth of the attention he was paying to her was too noticeable. She felt powerless to do anything to about

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it. It was becoming harder to raise sufficient energy to do anything. She was very heavy with this child, much more so than with Piotr. The women at Feodor's dasha, who were supposed to be knowledgeable about these things, had assured her that everything was progressing well - but she wasn't sure.

She longed for the presence of her husband - the man Georgi Malenski had once been - not the transformation into a monster. She was privy to most of the communiqués which flowed into Feodor's office. She knew where Georgi was and that he was directly involved in bloodshed and death and the forcible take-over of that which belonged to others. It was no place to take her son - or to trust herself and her unborn child. Joshua noticed her sitting behind the others.

"Dear sister Elena, please move forward into our circle - we are one here."

She complied because she had no other option, not to have done so would have highlighted her separateness. Joshua noticed the immediate attention supplied by Feodor and she was aware of his shrewd assessment. The Administrator of the Western European Area was a calculating man and she knew he had been mainly responsible for the most recent setback suffered by her husband. There was a shift in attention, someone had asked:

"When is the actual Ceremony of Union to take place, Sister Leah?"

"Our Firstling will tell us."

Elena felt a surge of excitement and at the same time, a tightening around her heart. It had been so long since she had faced a Firstling. With the heightening of anticipation, came the concern - how she could ever face the penetrating eyes of a Kingly-Priest. He would search her heart and would know that she had abandoned the man to whom she had been United in a similar ceremony. It seemed so long ago, another time in another world. Leah continued.

"We think it will be within the next two days."

One of the house-servants provided refreshments. The conversation was generalised and Elena sensed it was her presence. None of them trusted her - with the possible exception of the infatuated Feodor. Perhaps they had good reason. After a decent interval she excused herself. The conversation did not progress beyond trivia whilst she was within earshot. She reached her room and her eyes were flooded with tears. Never had she felt more alone. In the room which she had left, the subject matter had turned to that which concerned them all. Alexander was proclaiming with some heat.

"I tell you, Michael - Malenski has turned his rabble loose on my stewardship. They're coming in from every direction except from the east."

Joshua interjected.

"But surely, Alex - you can stop him in the mountains? The Balkans are one mess of mountains!"

"Not in the north of my stewardship, Joshua. There is a steady flow of farmers and their families surging into the plains around the Danube and the Drava. These - refugees - had what we can politely call - an armed escort. To the south, the army you turned back from Africa, is pushing into the polders around the old landmass of Greece - they're ignoring the mountains - bypassing them. The push is towards the east!"

Joshua murmured.

"Which is what we might expect."

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Alexander went on.

"Gog is with the southern force! He's behind the move through the Corinth Trough. But he's also co-ordinating the surge by his farmers further to the north."

Anatole wailed his complaint.

"I have nothing left to hold. There has been a pause, but now there's another move south into the remaining plains north of the Carpathians - and to the east as well, towards Feodor's territory."

Michael looked at Feodor, he was uncharacteristically silent.

"We already know that you are absorbing an ever increasing number of refugees in your northern areas. Is there any evidence of an armed escort?"

Feodor nodded.

"It would seem that our militant friend has changed his policy, now he is quite ready to get his way by force and not by subtle persuasion. I agree with Alex, Gog is on the move."

Joshua entered the fray once more.

"Are we expecting Micah?"

Michael shook his head.

"Our invitation was declined with polite felicitations - our co-Administrator pleads pressure of work."

Joshua's response was silky soft.

"What a pity."

An uneasy co-existence prevailed between Malenski and his general. Sedova had made the only decision open to him to agree to return with his army to the mouth of the Adriatic. He did so with good grace, acknowledging that Malenski had out-manoeuvred him, but he also agreed that it would have been foolhardy to attempt a crossing of the land bridge into Africa. The unknown element posed by the Aristides fleet on his exposed flank, had been the deciding factor. He was even ready to comply with the suggestion that he should lead the bulk of his army into the Corinth Trough and press eastward in the search for vital supplies. There was always the hope that Alexander Barenkov had not had the foresight to removed his stores further to the east - and so it proved. As they moved forward towards the highland of the isthmus which connected the Peleponnese to the northern mountains, they were able to reap a rich booty from poorly defended storage facilities.

Malenski was not in evidence on a continuous basis, he spent his time roaming up and down the mouth of the net he was placing over the responsibilities of the absentee stewards. He had learned the reason for their absence during a flying visit to the Vistula Secretariat - Anatole was in Jerusalem. Michael ben Levi and Leah Steinbecker were at last celebrating their Union. It suited Malenski's purposes very well to have both of the Barenkov brothers absent and it was even more gratifying when his spies told him that Feodor had also headed to the south. He was not so pleased to be told that Elena and Piotr had accompanied him.

Georgi returned to the alpine encampment. It was now nearly empty, most of the forces which had been trained by Pik Sedova, were spread out in a great arc around the triple prize of the three stewardships. It was time to absorb them, to remove them as pawns from the main game. It was time for him to assert his ancient ancestral ties to become in fact, the Prince of Rosh, of Tubal and of Meshech and to seek his alliances with the House of

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Togarmah and of Gomer. Only then would he be entitled to use the name which destiny had appointed to him - then he would become Gog and he would no longer frown upon those who elected to whisper his name.

The reports from Pik Sedova were good. He had made excellent headway to the east and on the third day after the return to the camp at the mouth of the Adriatic, he stood with the bulk of his army, on the heights overlooking the reclaimed plains of the Aegean Sea. The conquest had proceeded quickly. Malenski had left him the use of some of the Shuttles and Transporters which had brought the army back from Sicily. Sedova stared out over the flatlands and knew that the shore of the Eastern Basin lay beyond, out of sight, but within reach of his Shuttles and that beyond that shore, lay another - the shore of what they called the Holiest of all Lands.

His private spies had told him that Michael ben Levi was to celebrate his Union with the widow of Marcus Steinbecker. He was aware too, that those who had stood in the way of his army on their African adventure, had assembled there. His teeth were bared in the mockery of a smile. Pik Sedova would deliver his own, very personal gift, which would be sure to enliven the good Administrator's Union.

Within the time Leah had predicted that the Union would be Sanctified, Michael and Leah knelt before the Kingly-Priest who bestowed the blessings of the Father on their vows. Those assembled as guests, knelt in reverence around them. The presence of the Firstling created a pulsation of peace and reassurance. It was a reassurance that nothing could ever overwhelm them, if they clung to the hand of the Father, which was extended in blessing.

The Firstling remained with them for a while. He talked quietly to each one in turn before finally standing before Elena. He took her hand and she involuntarily began to weep. He said nothing and eventually, she lifted her eyes and stared into his. Not a word was spoken but the communication between them was tangible. He reached out his hands and placed them on her head and that of Piotr and then he spoke.

"The Lord bless thee and keep thee. The Lord make his face to shine upon you and be gracious unto thee. The Lord lift up his countenance upon thee and give thee his peace - now and for ever more."

He touched her hands once more and then released them and stepped away - and then he was gone. Elena took the hand of her son and walked from the room. No one spoke, they understood, it was a moment they could not share.

33.

During the nuptial night, there was a commotion in the house. Michael sat up and listened. It was lighter than it should have been. He slipped out of the bed, hoping not to waken Leah and moved quickly to the window. It faced out towards Jerusalem, It was from there that the glow in the sky originated. Leah joined him at the window.

"What is it?"

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"I don't know - "

The door chime sounded, that in itself was unusual, if anyone had wanted to contact him, they would normally have used the communicator. Michael opened the door cautiously. Luke Belin stood facing him, he was a picture of abject apology.

"I am so sorry to disturb you, Michael - but I think you should know - Mount Zion and Mount Moriah are ablaze! The Temple Mount has been torched!"

"Torchted!"

"There's a ring of fire right around the base of the reserved area inside the wall. The trees and scrub have been deliberately fired - at the moment, we have a team of citizens helping to control the flames!"

Leah and Michael dressed quickly and joined Luke in a Pod at the front of the house. The rest of the wedding guests had been roused and they were crowding into other pods. Michael gestured Luke to get on his way, he had no desire to waste time debating what might or might not have caused the conflagration. Leah murmured softly.

"The parklands at the base must be on fire all the way around. I suppose there's no possibility of it being an accident, Luke?"

Their driver shook his head.

"All reports indicate a sudden encirclement of fires, as if they had all been lit at the same time. If it had started in one place and spread, there might be a case to be made for it to be an accident."

Because it was the Administrator's Pod, they were given priority over other traffic into the centre of Jerusalem - but it was obvious that most of the population were converging on the scene of the blaze. The Pod eased through a huge crowd which had assembled against a cordon of hastily summoned militia. Michael looked at them as they passed, they were well behaved, silent, staring at the roaring flames beyond the encircling wall, which kept this most holy of sites apart from the rest of Jerusalem. He knew too well, that it was considered to be holy ground and he knew as surely, that this was the work of Gog!

They stepped from the Pod and moved to the command point. The Militia Commander turned and saluted.

"Captain Eli Benjamin, sir. We haven't got the flames under control yet, I'm afraid - the water pressure up here is pretty bad."

Michael said almost to himself.

"The water supply is barely sufficient for a small village, let alone a city."

The captain looked at him quickly and said nothing. Michael elaborated.

"That was the assessment of an engineer from over one thousand years ago - before the Great Destruction. Nothing much has changed!"

"No, sir - it hasn't! The fire is getting away from us, spreading up the hillside. I can't understand it, I would have thought, with all the wet weather we've had, it would be hard to take hold."

Michael stared beyond the crown of the flames.

"Give me your glasses, captain."

The young officer took them from around his neck and handed them to him. Michael focused them beyond the fire line, towards the crest of the hills. He stared for a long moment.

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"There are people on the summit!"

The captain reclaimed his glasses.

"Are you sure, sir - who would be on the summit at this time of night - and who would be fool enough to stay up there with a fire all around them?"

"A good question, brother Eli - perhaps, the people who started it in the first place!"

"I think I see them."

"They're not easy to see because of the heat mirage from the fire, but I'm sure there are people up there!"

Luke interjected.

"We've had a flood of reports about the increase of hooliganism in the city, brother Michael."

Michael nodded.

"I know, I've read the reports, Luke. Somehow I doubt if there's a connection. I find it hard to believe that some of our wild youngsters would desecrate the Temple Mount. We might be wise to keep an open mind until we have all the facts."

It took some time before the fire was brought under control. As soon as it was safe to pass through the blackened area, they joined a group of militia to climb to the summit on foot. It was judged too dangerous to use the Pod lines before they were checked out. Long before they reached the brow of Mount Moriah, Michael could see that something had been altered on the summit. He opened his communicator and issued a brisk order.

"I want no lights to be directed to the hilltop - and I want someone up here, on the double, with power saws!"

Leah looked into his grim face.

"I want no one to see this, Leah. I want no one to see how the sanctuary and the citadel has been desecrated by the forces of Gog!"

They had reached the site of the desecration. A tree had been cut down from further down the slope and hauled to the top, close to the commemoration stone which indicated the place of Abraham's willingness to sacrifice Isaac. It had been erected into a hole and leaned at a crazy angle, which was almost an additional obscenity. Leah whispered.

"I don't understand, Michael - it's only a tree trunk."

"A tree trunk of obscenity, Leah! This is a Baal - don't you understand what that means?"

She shook her head.

"Apart from it being the name of an ancient god worshipped by the tribes in this part of the world - no, I don't understand."

"It wasn't only worshipped in this part of the world. It has its counterpart in many other ancient cultures - and in each case, it served the same purpose. Baal the male expression and Ashtoreth was the female. Many sacrifices were made to this god and goddess. You are right, Baal is an ancient god, which serves the basest aspect of human nature - to be precise, Baal was a fertility god. The tree trunk represents the symbol of male fertility - it is a phallic symbol! I knew I could see figures up here when we couldn't get through the ring of fire. I wouldn't like to describe what they were probably doing!"

In biblical times the prophets of Israel tried to keep the Israelites on a godly path, but constantly, they had to fight the gods who were around them - one of the most serious threats came from Baal and Ashtoreth. We can read

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over and over again, that Baals were set up in high places and that the godly kings and the prophets had them cut down and burnt. Then, there would be backsliding kings who allowed their people to erect them again. Jezebel worshipped Baal and put the prophets to death if they defied her.

It didn't seem to matter how much the people were warned against worshipping them, they seemed to have a fatal attraction. This is 'the abominable thing that causes desolate'. Now do you understand?"

Leah whispered:

'Armed forces dispatched by him will desecrate the sanctuary and the citadel and do away with the regular offering. And there will be set up the "abominable thing that causes desolation"

Michael nodded, grim faced.

"Exactly - and we can also consider it to be a personal message to us, my darling. A message of contempt which says: 'Enjoy your new relationship whilst you can, but remember, I am coming!'"

Leah shook her head.

"I can't believe that Georgi Malenski would do this."

"Georgi Malenski might not - but Gog certainly would - and has!"

A troop of men loomed out of the darkness, they carried power cutters. Michael waited until they had gathered round him.

"I want this thing cut down and the pieces carried back down to the fire. I want every part of it burnt - every splinter, even the dust which comes from the cutter. I want the soil around hole, dug out and I want the stump and the soil around it carried down to the fire. Not the tiniest scrap must remain - is that clearly understood? After you have finished, I want you to burn every scrap of your clothing and I want you to be scrubbed clean before you leave this holy hill. Eli Benjamin, I will hold you responsible to make sure that this is done as I have directed!"

The captain looked stunned but he stammered acceptance. Michael turned to Luke.

"I want you to catch up with the group who has done this, I have no doubt that are now heading back to the coast. I want the countryside roused and I want those men!"

Luke stammered.

"Is that wise, Michael."

"Do as I say! I will deal with these men, Luke - and Gog will learn that he does not do as he pleases in the sanctuary and citadel of Jerusalem!"

Leah took his arm, he was rigid with tension.

"Come away, Michael - there's nothing more you can do here - and Luke is right, keep your fingers away from these men, God will deal with them in His own good time - He doesn't need you to deal out justice on His behalf!"

She wasn't sure whether he heard her, but he allowed her to lead him back down the darkened hill. At the base, their Pod stood ready to take them back to Asher's villa. The air was acrid with the stench of burned trees and undergrowth. Here and there, the fires flared and subsided, fanned by a fitful breeze. Most of the crowd had dispersed, the excitement was at an end and there was nothing more to see now that the worst of the fires had been put out. A militia cordon still protected the controlled entrance to the summit road.

Michael looked back at the darkened hilltop, there was no sign of the

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activity which he had ordered. It was an attempt to expunge the presence of evil from the holy site. He felt as if he had been physically violated and no matter how much he tried to tell himself that it was only a symbolic place, one which had meant a great deal in previous times, but now, was only a commemoration site of what had once happened there, he still felt as if he had been dealt a physical blow.

The night was nearly over and the first light of the dawn touched the eastern sky. Luke had been busy on the Pod's communicator. By now, squads of men were scouring the countryside between Jerusalem and the polders along the Eastern Basin, trying to intercept the perpetrators of the evil. The heat and anger in Michael had ebbed away, he began to wonder what he would do with Gog's men if any were captured. Leah had been right, he had thrown out lurid threats under the stress of the moment and the summits of Zion and Moriah were an appropriate place for that sort of talk, but when it came to physically dealing with the guilty men, he was now no longer so sure. For some reason, he was reminded that he still had Deborah Steinbecker and David locked away and that he still prevaricated about their fate. A decision would have to be made about them before long.

They returned to Asher's villa, it was ablaze with light. Their wedding guests were waiting for them in the main reception room. All of them looked a little sick and even Joshua could find nothing to say to the grim faced man who had joined them. Elena Malenski stood rigidly by the side of her chair and as always, the ever faithful Feodor was in attendance. Leah asked:

"I take it that you have heard what happened?"

Joshua offered cautiously.

"We heard that the Temple Mount was set alight and that now, the fire has been put out."

Leah glanced at Michael, he seemed totally exhausted, it was almost as if he was hardly aware of what was happening.

"It was more than that, Joshua - the Temple Mount was desecrated by - by an effigy - and we believe certain - rites were performed around it!"

Feodor burst in.

"What sort of rites?"

Elena placed a hand on his arm.

"I know what they are, Feodor."

She eased down into a chair and winced in discomfort.

"It was one of the reasons why I left Gorki."

Michael looked up sharply. Elena went on.

"What I did tell you was true enough - I no longer recognised Georgi Malenski as the man I married. He was a godly man and I loved him - but he has changed into a fanatic. He drives himself and he drives others beyond the point of mental endurance. I didn't want my son to be raised in an atmosphere of veneration of war and victories over peaceful people whose only crime was to try to protect their homes and lands from rapacious savages! Nor did I want him to bow down to men like Pik Sedova.

I didn't want my child to be born into such an atmosphere - I didn't want to be known as the wife of Gog, or my children, as the children of a monster - but there was something else - something the women whispered about and laughed about behind their hands. It took me some time to work out what they were saying but eventually, I realised that there was some sort of cultus celebrated in the fields around Gorki. They would go out at night

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and come back filthy and laughing - and stinking!

Eventually, one of the women preened herself in front of me and mocked my innocence. She told me that they had gone back to the old ways - she called them the exciting ways, when the blood ran free and they could forget all their inhibitions. The excuse she made was that they were trying to make the fields fertile, so that we all had enough to eat - but it was only an excuse. It was then that I decided to flee to the south."

The silence was profound. Feodor looked frankly thunderstruck. Michael stared hard at Elena and said nothing. There was still one more thing she wanted to say.

"I want you to know this, Michael ben Levi. I don't believe my husband knew about what they were doing. - I see that you find that hard to believe, but I am sure he had no idea. - Georgi is a dreamer - most of the time, he lives in a world of his own, trying to resolve the impossible problems he has been given. He is a man who walks apart, he would never demean himself to join in such an activity - and he would never turn a blind eye to such filth.

It is my belief that Georgi would never have sent anyone to desecrate the Temple Mount. He would never have commemorated your Nuptials with such an act of contempt. He holds you and Leah in very high regard. Georgi would not have done this thing - there is only one who would have dared to do so - "

Michael murmured.

"Pik Sedova."

Elena nodded. She leaned back and closed her eyes and a tear trickled down her face.

"Georgi may or may not be Gog - but Sedova most certainly is!"

Pik Sedova was well satisfied with the excursion into enemy territory. The project had been carried out with precision and there were no casualties. The shuttles which had taken his men close to Jerusalem, had come in low over the polders bordering the ancient coast of the Holiest of all Lands. They had been undetected in the general traffic which flowed back and forth between the cities along the shoreline. The general aura of festivity which had accompanied the nuptials of the Administrator and his bride, had provided the degree of laxity he had required for the element of surprise.

His men had been tough fighters and well able to scramble up and down the mountainsides in their progress through the Carpathians and the Alpine chain. The wall surrounding the sanctuary had been a contemptible obstacle. They had fired the lower slopes after they had erected the effigy. There had been time for a little 'exuberance' on the summit, before they had quietly slipped away through a small gap in the cordon of fire and had returned to their shuttles. By the time Michael had woken up to the fact that he had been invaded and had ordered out his militia to scour the countryside, Sedova's men were already half way home across the expanse of the Eastern Basin. All in all, it had been a most satisfactory exercise and one which had bloodied the nose of his opponents.

Sedova received the enthusiastic reports and joined in the applause of his captains. The episode had raised morale even higher than that which had followed his string of victories in the Corinth Trough and to the east. He was content to rest his men. He needed time to consider his approach when confronted with the wrath of his commander. He had no doubt that he would soon be faced with a very angry Georgi Malenski, who would be far from

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appreciating the initiative of the raid on Jerusalem.

He wondered how much longer he was going to tolerate this bureaucrat who tried to run his campaigns as if he was moving wheat quotas from one district to another. Only one thing stood in the way of removing Georgi Malenski from the scene and that was the undoubted awe and mystique with which the bulk of his followers regarded him.

Pik Sedova had not been wrong when he assessed that his commander would be annoyed, but he could never have imagined the degree of fury which was unleashed on the luckless Ruri when he brought the news to Georgi, who had taken up residence in the Vistula headquarters of Anatole Barenkov. The long awaited explosion of frustration and rage erupted. It was fortunate that Ruri had two companions with him, for Malenski had taken him by the throat and screamed into his face and would have choked him to death if they hadn't forced him to let go.

As suddenly as his rage had erupted, it was spent. He sagged in the restraining arms and stared mutely at the blackened face of his friend. Ruri had collapsed to the floor and was trying to suck air into starved lungs. Georgi shrugged himself free and they let him go. He went down on his knees and hauled the gasping man upright. He bowed his head and sobbed aloud. Ruri reached out and took his shoulder. He managed a painful rasp.

"It doesn't help to kill the messenger, Georgi!"

Malenski nodded mutely and then managed to whisper.

"But I will kill Pik Sedova!"

The two companions took Ruri away and Georgi turned to stare blindly out of the window. It would not be long before Anatole returned - that is, if he had not decided to cut his losses and remain in Jerusalem or alternatively, flee to his brother in the south - or to Feodor Chernienko in the east. If Anatole did return, he would hear at first hand an account of what had actually happened in Jerusalem. He turned back to the fire which was trying to heat the cold room. He couldn't get warm and it seemed that as each day passed, he became more and more cold, as if he was freezing from within. If Elena had been with him, it would be have been different, but she was not and that in itself, created an inner chill. He was a lonely man and his followers knew it. More than once, there had been a hint that he should take one of the women who were always more than ready to offer themselves to the great leader - but he could not - if Elena was gone from him, there would never be anyone else.

He thought over his threat to kill Pik Sedova. It had been an expression of outrage following on his attack on Ruri. It might have been a wild statement, but it was no idle threat. He had known for some time that eventually, the time would come when Sedova would be more of a liability than an asset. He knew also, that Sedova had his agenda. The time was fast approaching when Georgi Malenski would prove to be a thorn in Sedova's side. It might come down to who would strike first.

The time was fast approaching when he would control the lands north of the old Black Sea. Feodor would be swept aside, as he had swept aside the feeble resistance of Anatole Barenkov and was in the process of doing the same to his brother Alexander. Feodor would put up a fight, of that, he was quite sure. It was such a useless expenditure of energy. Couldn't his opponents realise that it was a matter of course that he should become the Prince of Rosh and Tubal and Meshech? Nothing could stand against the

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inevitable, even Michael ben Levi would have to acknowledge it.

He thought over the last conversation he had had with him. Michael had said something to the effect:

'I will never call you Gog, unless you start to act like Gog, or until you call yourself Gog'

Georgi stared into the fire, he whispered into the flames.

"I am Gog and you are Michael! I do the works of Gog and you must do the works of Michael!"

### 34.

The day following the attack on the citadel and the sanctuary, was a day of departures. The nuptial festivities were at an end. The temptation to prolong them into days of recreation, had been dispelled by the events on the Temple Mount. No one went back to their beds after the return from the scene of the sacrilege, but they all had dispersed, leaving Michael with his new bride. She hardly dared to touch him. He sat rigidly in his chair, staring out into the hills around the villa, but she knew he didn't see the dawn touching them. He was reliving the vision of violation and despoliation of the parklands below the altar of sacrifice. She urged him quietly.

"You must turn your mind away from it, Michael. It does no good to go over and over what has happened."

She wondered if he heard her, until he answered softly.

"I am supposed to stand up for my people, Leah - I couldn't even protect them from the sight of the focal point of our history being violated. By this time, the word is circulating like the fire which raced up the hills of Zion and Moriah. Gog's men planted their obscene standard at the very heart of our territory. He has shown that he can walk in and out of our stronghold at will. The Camp of the Saints is as vulnerable to him as any other point on the surface of the earth. Michael, the great Prince, was powerless to prevent it. How then will he prevent Gog from bringing his army to encircle the Camp of the Saints? How will he win the battle against an invincible commander?"

"Michael will not win the battle, my darling. God will see to it - and you could not prevent what has happened. It was written as a prophecy and had to be fulfilled. The 'abomination of desolation' had to be set up on Zion's hill and the site of the Temple and the place of ancient sacrifice had to be violated - it was God's will that it should happen!"

He looked at her and managed a smile.

"You understand that, Leah - and I understand it - although it doesn't ease the pain - but how will the citizens of Jerusalem understand it?"

"They will, or they will not. Perhaps, it is part of the great test which shows who has confidence in God and His Son and His Firstlings - and those who have a greater confidence in the power of Gog!"

He reached over and drew her to him.

"It hasn't been much of a marriage so far, has it, my darling?"

Her response was muffled.

"No - but I'm quite certain you'll make up for it!"

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He held her out at arms length. She blushed but there was a glint of mischief in her eyes. It was an irresistible combination - he kissed her tenderly until she drew back.

"Remember, I'm a mother with two children - and I think I hear them!"

◁ He sighed in mock exasperation and let her go to them. When he was alone again, the earlier melancholy returned. The vision of the scene of debauchery still haunted him. One of the phrases of the prophesy concerning the event came back to him:

... and do away with the regular offering.'

There had not been a regular offering at the site of the ancient temple since it had been destroyed by the forces of Titus - that is, not in the sense of that laid down in the time of Solomon. Gog had not 'done away' with anything tangible - but he had managed to render the site unclean in the biblical sense and the mental offering which it represented was certainly eliminated.

At the beginning of the thousand years, someone had asked the question as to whether the Temple should be rebuilt in the centre of a new city to be constructed on the devastated site of the old Jerusalem. It had been pointed out that there was no need for a temple. God dwelt with His people through the new order of the Kingdom of Peace. His Son and His Firstlings were present amongst the citizens, and a new temple was unnecessary. His worship was manifested in the activities of the Kingdom and the spirit of sacrifice lived in the hearts of those who listened to the teaching of the Kingly-Priests.

He was stirred out of his reverie by a polite clearing of the throat. He looked up and met the unsteady gaze of Anatole Barenkov. Michael sensed what was to come.

"It's time for me to go home, Michael. I'm so sorry that the festivities have been cut short by last night's incident - but it isn't for that reason. The latest reports from the Vistula tell me that there isn't much left of my stewardship and that if I hope to salvage any authority, I had better return. Malenski has spread his refugees into the remaining areas - together with armed escorts. Without a standing militia, there isn't much I can do - "

Michael nodded, there had never been very much that Anatole could do. Anatole took courage from the sign of agreement.

"In fact, I have been reconsidering the situation and I believe that there isn't very much I can still offer you - accept my best wishes for the future. I have nothing left, you see - and I've always known that if I do not accept Georgi Malenski as my joint steward, I will lose everything. I have no alternative but to revert to the Administration of Alexei Kharkov!"

The last phrase was accompanied by a great nervous release of breath. Anatole's chest still heaved whilst he waited for a response. Michael nodded again.

"I'm sorry I couldn't offer you more than moral support, Anatole. I perfectly understand your position. I ask only one thing of you, that you remember that your co-operation with the forces of Gog must never become actual support - otherwise you will find yourself suffering his inevitable condemnation and fate! Beware of the Second Death, for I believe that it is manifested in Gog and his Horde! I thank you for your alliance - and I wish you well."

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Anatole stammered his farewells and escaped. Michael looked after him and wondered how long it would be before Alexander followed his brother's lead. He was left in peace for a further hour, then his solitude was interrupted by another visitor. Michael rose to his feet, this was one encounter had not expected. Elena Malenski allowed him to escort her to a chair and waited until he was positioned opposite her.

"I expect you are wondering why I would want to talk to you?"

"It's always a pleasure to have your company, Elena."

The response was a fleeting smile.

"I think you find me a very prickly person to deal with, Michael ben Levi, but you're too polite to say so!"

Michael eased back in his chair.

"And why do you think I would find you a prickly person, sister Malenski?"

"You've just answered your own question - because I'm sister Malenski!"

He waited for more.

"I know that I am an embarrassment wherever I happen to be."

"Not so much an embarrassment - perhaps - an unknown quantity."

"Thank you for being frank and acknowledging that I'm not just another house guest!"

"You have been very welcome to share our festivity, Elena. I hope no one has given you a reason to think otherwise."

She shook her head.

"Everyone has been perfectly well mannered - perhaps, they have even strained to be so perfectly agreeable."

Michael tilted back his head and laughed.

"Which way do you want it, Elena - dirty looks because you happen to be the estranged wife of a political enemy - or to be accepted for what you are - a woman who has asked for protection and who has been provided with that help?"

Elena flushed.

"Perhaps I just want to find honesty so that I can plan for my future."

Michael's smile faded.

"I thought your future was secure. I am sure Feodor has no intention of asking you to leave his protection."

She was silent for a moment.

"What if I thought it was no longer such a good idea to prevail upon his kindness?"

Michael steeped his fingers.

"Do you have a reason for thinking it isn't such a good idea to carry on with the arrangement?"

Once again, she flushed.

"You are a shrewd man, Michael. You must realise how things are developing with Feodor - if not, ask Leah - or any of the others. Feodor is becoming - too attached to me! I can see it happening and it's something I have resisted. I have never encouraged him - in fact, I've done everything I can think of to discourage him, but it is so obvious! I can't stay with him. I must move on. The other factor is Piotr - he has become so fond of Feodor - They are like father and son. I can't have that, Michael. Georgi Malenski is Piotr's father - that can never change and I pray so hard to our God that

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somehow, in some way I can't see, a change will take place and we will wake up from this nightmare and that Georgi will go back to being the man he was, so that I can take home his son and be a wife to him!"

She was crying, Michael wasn't sure how he could comfort her. Leah rescued him. She took one look at the weeping woman, issued a silent but accusative glare at her husband and took Elena from the room. Michael stared after them and wondered how he had suddenly become the villain. He looked out into the garden. Anatole and Alexander was pacing one of the paths together, their conversation was very emphatic. Michael shook his head, everything was happening at once - and the day was no more than three hours old!

He ate a solitary breakfast, served by a sombre house servant who appeared to have caught the general aura of tension. He made quick work of the light meal and then attended to some urgent dispatches brought to him by Luke. His secretary had a cheerful face. Michael was compelled to comment on it.

"It's good to see that someone still remembers how to smile!"

Luke looked a little uncertain and the smile faded. Michael raised his eyes to the ceiling.

"I wasn't complaining about your broad grin, Luke! I was offering praise and thanksgiving! What do you have for me?"

"A sheaf of congratulations from some of the more distant of your stewards - particularly from Simon in Salem. It makes interesting reading."

"Since when has congratulations produced anything other than a warm glow?"

"You're in a cheerful mood this morning."

"You might recall - despite the general confusion - I am now a married man and have the right to appear cheerful first thing in the morning! What does Simon have to say?"

"I'll skip the private bit - which I suggest is for your eyes only and not those of your wife! It appears that the Clan Steinbecker is walking around with their noses so high in the air with general disapproval, that they're in imminent danger of falling over their own feet! It would seem that you have earned their collective disapproval for taking the Widow Steinbecker in marriage!"

Michael took the communiqué from him and read it in its entirety. He read the personal preamble with a broad grin which gradually faded as he took in the rest.

"You know, Luke. If I didn't know better, I would have almost been ready to blame last night's events on some Steinbecker hothead - but I think we have pinpointed the real culprit."

"I think so too. That brings us to another point which I hesitate to bring up today of all days, but a decision must be made before long."

"You mean I can't delay deciding what I will do with Kurt Weber and Deborah and David Steinbecker."

Luke nodded.

"You're right, it isn't a good day to bring it up - but then, no day is a good day when it comes to this sort of thing. What do you think I should do, Luke? We have no judicial infrastructure. We have no judges, prosecutors, defence counsel. We have no jails and jailers. We have no executioners, if it should come to that. All of these things have been left in the hands of the

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Kingly-Priests - because we were living under a time of Peace and Mercy and there was never a need to exercise judgement. Now, we've moved on to another era and we have need to do something with those who break the rules of our society and above all, those who break the laws based upon the Commandment of God. So - What are we to do - I'm open to suggestions?"

"We will all soon be judged by the Great Judge."

Michael gestured impatiently.

"I know that! I once spoke to Leah about it, she told me in no uncertain terms that I should remember not to judge others, for by the measure that I judge, so would I be judged. It's a sobering thought, isn't it? On the other hand, I can't allow the wrongdoers to go unpunished, that would invite anarchy throughout what is left of the areas under our Administration."

"The areas left?"

Michael nodded.

"Anatole has formally severed his ties with us."

"The fool!"

Michael waved a quietening hand.

"He who calls his brother a fool is a murderer!"

"He is a fool! Does he think he will survive against Gog? As soon as he has served what little purpose he has, he will be sucked dry and then thrown aside without mercy."

"It wouldn't be the first time that it has happened in the history of man - it so happens, that I believe he has little other choice. I wished him well. After all, if he can remain alive and at least a little independent, he still remains a passive ally. What good would it do if he went back to the Vistula, breathing fire and thunder and finding himself on the wrong end of a Scandian assassin's sword?"

"What about Alexander?"

"I don't know, the pot is still boiling."

"You haven't decided what to do about our criminals."

"I've decided to think about it - it's too nice a day to pronounce death sentences!"

Joshua was in a particularly solemn mood when he made his farewells.

"My dear friend, I'm sorry to leave you so soon - especially after the events of last night. I have received a communiqué from home. Maman is very much weaker and reading between the lines, I think it is high time that I made my way back. I somehow think this shall be the last time we shall meet in the flesh! Yes, Michael, I mean it. The northern frontier is under severe threat from fresh bands of Scandians being pushed south by the winter. They are flooding into the northern flatlands and soon will pour down into the rich provinces north of the Pyrenees. I very much doubt if I can be of much use to you in the future, I will have all my forces concentrated against them, to try to hold what we have and to protect the Gibraltar Dam - and you, I think, will soon find yourself encircled by the confederation Gog will build against you. I bid you farewell, my dear friend! I am so happy that Leah has found happiness with you and that I could witness your Nuptials. I must hurry back to tell Maman all about it - and then, I think, it will be time to lay her to rest!"

Michael and Leah made a point of escorting him to the Salt Sea Terminal. He had been a wonderful friend, much more than a political ally. They watched the Shuttle depart and dwindle into the distance. In the Pod on their way back to the villa, Michael murmured.

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"I think he was right. This is the last time we shall meet him face to face. There might be a few conferences whilst the holo system holds together, but I think it will be our only contact. The words of prophesy contain no more references to the 'king of the west'. Joshua has served out his part as far as we are concerned - now, he has to fight off the Scandians."

There was another prolonged silence. Michael left Leah to her thoughts. He didn't find it uncomfortable to know that they probably concerned Joshua - after all, there had been a history between them. Just before they reached the villa, she broke the silence.

"Elena wants to leave Feodor."

"I know."

"She wants to place herself and Piotr under your protection and live in Jerusalem!"

He glanced at her quickly.

"How do you feel about that? What did you tell her?"

Leah's voice was carefully neutral.

"It sounds a sensible solution - given the circumstances with Feodor. I told her that the decision was between you and her."

They had reached the villa. Feodor was pacing up and down in front of the main entrance. Michael muttered.

"I think we'd better add Feodor to that equation."

They barely had a chance to straighten upright before Feodor pounced.

"Michael! What's this rubbish about asking Elena to stay in Jerusalem - she's coming back to Kharkov with me!"

"Quieten down, Feodor! In the first place, I haven't asked her to stay in Jerusalem - and in the second, she is a free agent and neither you or I can insist that she does anything!"

Feodor stared at him.

"You didn't ask her to stay?"

Michael shook his head. Feodor wheeled about and bounded up the steps and disappeared into the house. Michael glanced at Leah and shrugged. They followed the ardent swain into the house. Raised voices issued from the reception room.

"I want you with me, Elena - damn it! I love you, I want to unite with you and look after you and your children. There's no life for you with Georgi, you must realise that!"

Elena was quieter.

"I realise that you have developed feelings for me, Feodor. It's for this reason that I must leave your home and settle here in Jerusalem - if Michael will allow it. I am Georgi's wife and Piotr is his son and this child is also his. There is no place in my life for another man! I'm so sorry, Feodor. I should never have come to you and when I saw what was happening, I should have left then - much earlier."

Feodor stared at her and then wheeled around once more. He glared at Michael.

"Refuse to allow her to stay!"

"If I do that, she will go somewhere else - Nile City perhaps. I told you - Elena has the right to do as she pleases. I have no reason to deny her request to live in Jerusalem."

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Feodor went through several shades of colour.

"The wife of Gog in Jerusalem - are you mad?"

Michael stared at him grimly.

"I suggest you're forgetting yourself! If Georgi should happen to be Gog, you didn't find it difficult to look after his wife and son in Kharkov!"

Feodor stared from one to the other in turn, before wheeling about and storming from the room. Michael slowly shook his head. He looked as if he was in imminent danger of losing all three of his northern allies within one day. Leah took care of the distressed Elena. He was left to his own devices but not for long. Luke appeared with a communiqué clutched in his fist. He handed it to Michael without comment. The message was simple. Miriam Aristides was dead. The woman who had been the daughter of a contemporary of Carl Steinbecker before the Great Destruction, had passed away peacefully, whilst her son was completing the journey homewards. The description of the nuptials between Michael and Leah, would never be related.

"I will word a message of condolence to Joshua - but I think it unwise for Leah and me to attend the Committal. Joshua will understand, he told me that we would never meet again in the flesh. Everything is coming to a head, Luke. It will be a matter of weeks before a ring of steel is forged around us and then we will gradually lose ground until Gog and his Horde are at the appointed place."

Alexander Barenkov claimed his attention for a brief farewell. It was surprising that there were no signs of a breach in the arrangements of stewardship. He was full of plans to organise guerrilla forces to strike at Sedova and his armies in the Balkans. The success of previous forays had been encouraging. He was a likeable fellow, totally different in temperament to his defeatist brother. Michael would have dearly liked to have offered tangible help, but he had none to give. If only they had followed the urgings of Joel and Asher in the last years of the Kingdom and had built up a strong armed force to cater for the situations which had arisen - but the Administrators had thought otherwise and the individual Administrators had moved with extreme caution - it was a matter of too little too late.

Feodor was the last to leave, he was barely civil, but the alliance with his stewardship still held. It was very clear that he was a desperately unhappy man, who somehow managed to blame Michael for the loss of Elena. He left, looking grimly determined to do something reckless and Michael had the uneasy feeling that it would not be long in manifesting itself.

The evening came and he was able to sit with his wife and her children and watch the sun set over the Great Sea, knowing that beyond it, a brother Administrator mourned his loss and that to the north, Gog and his Horde built up their threat and encroached on the stewardship of men without hope who were committed to fighting a desperate rearguard action.

It was only a matter of four weeks before the conquest of the southern

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area of the Balkan peninsula was complete. Here and there, forces loyal to Alexander, held out in shrinking pockets, which only succeeded in tying down small segments of Sedova's army. From the Adriatic trough to the reclaimed polders of the ancient Aegean Sea, Georgi's general was in control. He had consolidated his gains along the old coastline of eastern Greece and had then stretched east and south in a great arc, to encompass the softer targets of the reclaimed areas. For the most part, the rocky Aegean islands, which had once been Greece's jewels, and which lowered water levels had converted into craggy peaks amidst the polders, were the only places of refuge for the inhabitants. They were being taken, one after the other - almost leisurely - and those who had dared to defy the might of Sedova's army were butchered - even if they chose to surrender. There was no mercy.

The craggy spine of Crete held out and Sedova seemed in no hurry to commit his men to the difficult task of scouring the mist shrouded mountains. He turned his attention firstly to the north and was soon supplying the southern arm of a pincer movement against the last strongholds of Alexander in the plain enclosed by the great loop of the Balkan Mountains and the Carpathian Alps. It was the last redoubt of his stewardship. Alexander's last line of retreat was to the east, into Feodor's stewardship.

The northern arm of the pincer, was a surge of refugees with their armed escorts, which had moved southward from the totally occupied stewardship of the acquiescent Anatole. The same general movement to the south was also occurring in the northern portion of Feodor's stewardship, but here, the resistance was greater and the progress slower - but there was still progress and Feodor was realist enough to know that it would only be a matter of time before he was forced to fall back from his Administrative centre at Kharkov, towards the old continental shore of the Black Sea - and beyond, into the Caucasus and Anatolia.

Georgi Malenski was fast becoming the ruler of the lands which his ancestors had inhabited. He moved methodically, consolidating his acquisitions, co-ordinating the provisioning of his forces. He still refused to call them his armies - with the possible exception of those controlled directly by Sedova.

In general terms, the movement was always southward. In a great line, his people encroached down into the Land of Rosh and further to the east, into the wide plains to the north and east of the Caspian and Aral Depression, until they came against the bulwark of the Hindu Kush and its western extension south of the Caspian. His farmers had slowly established themselves and those who had held the lands for centuries, were intimidated by the armed escorts he had sent with his Siberians.

The western extension of the mountains formed the boundary of the ancient land of Persia. It was also the boundary between the modern Central Administration and that of Alexei Kharkov. Georgi was acutely aware that to go beyond, would take him out of the Heartland Administrative Area - and outside of the brief he had been given by Alexei, so many months earlier. So far, he had remained within the area controlled by Alexei. The three stewardships, those of the Barenkovs and Feodor Chernienko, he had always considered part of the Heartland - no matter what political manoeuvrings there had been.

To go beyond the Administration boundary would signal a change in the concept of absorbing the displaced citizens of the northern lands. He

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would then be exceeding the legitimacy he had claimed, of acting only within the authority given by Alexei. To venture into the territory of the Central Administration, would create an irreversible progression of events and confirm that he was on the pathway of conquest.

Malenski stood in the doorway of his Shuttle and looked at the great mountains which stood in his path. Beyond them, towards the south-west was Persia and to the south-east, the country, which some said, was the ancient land of Nod, to which Cain had been banished after he had killed his brother, Abel. It had had many other names, but in the time just before the Great Destruction, it had been called Afghanistan. It was surely ironic, that the man they openly called Gog, was standing on the border of one of the earliest geographical, biblical references to betrayal and murder. Perhaps, there was a lesson for him to learn.

He no longer cared whether they called him Gog, or some other name. He made no protest when they treated him with reverent awe, or lowered their eyes when he passed. He was a man who walked alone and those who had once been called his advisors, were now no more than a group of men who jumped to obey his commands. He made the decisions, he controlled a vast area and he had his finger on the pulse of the homogeneous mass of humanity, who collectively, could now be called his Horde.

It was already late in the day, he wrinkled his nose in distaste at the option of returning to Gorki in darkness. He would arrive in the early hours of the morning to a cold welcome and bleak lodgings in the house he had chosen for his family - but his family were no longer there. Another option would be to stay in his shuttle and use some of the emergency rations for an evening meal. For once, he didn't want his own company, perhaps it was the thought of Elena and Piotr.

The latest communiqué he had received had been terse - Elena had taken their son to Jerusalem and had decided to stay there under the protection of the newly married Michael ben Levi. It raised the question of what had happened to prompt the move. It was surely a bitter irony that his wife and son were now in the heart of the Camp of the Saints, which he was destined to encircle in a final battle. They were even further out of his reach. He has nursed the prospect that there had always been a chance that he might have recovered them when he had overrun the last, futile resistance Feodor Chernienko was offering.

It was not an evening to be alone with his thoughts. He decided to accept the tentative offer of hospitality he had received earlier in the day, from one of the farming families who had moved into the area.

Yuri Kemerov was a normally phlegmatic man, his conversation was measured and well considered. He was the sort of man who definitely put his brain into gear before he opened his mouth. He was well respected in the small community of refugees who had banded together to occupy the new lands below the mountain barrier of the Hindu Kush. It was probably as well that he had such a calm disposition, for it was quite a shock to the constitution, to be confronted by the calm features of the man they were openly calling Gog. The fabled leader had appeared on the threshold of the rough shelter Yuri had found abandoned by its previous owner and which he had thankfully appropriated. The former owner would find it confiscated if he chose to return from where he had retreated to the south with the advent of the newcomers.

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Malenski felt a rare surge of amusement. The look of shock had been quickly hidden. Yuri stood aside and bowed, indicating that the unexpected visitor should enter. It was a strangely anachronistic display of the manners of hospitality.

"I welcome you to my house, brother Malenski."

The man had a deep voice and it was pitched a little loud. Georgi suppressed a smile. There could be no doubt that the welcome had carried to other areas of the small dwelling and that the man's spouse had been given time to compose herself before meeting the dreaded Gog. Georgi inclined his head in acceptance.

"I remembered your offer of hospitality, brother Kemerov."

There was a fleeting expression of surprise that his name should be remembered from thousands of others. Once again, it was quickly suppressed. Malenski chose to misinterpret.

"I was not mistaken? You did offer me hospitality?"

"If I showed surprise, brother Malenski, it was that you should accept the small degree of comfort we can offer."

Georgi smiled appreciatively - the man was quick on his feet.

"I think we both remember how little comfort we shared crossing Siberia, brother Yuri!"

It struck an immediate chord - fellow travellers in adversity!

"We suffered, but you gave us hope - and now you have given us a new country to tame!"

"It will need taming, I think. This can be a harsh land and we can't be sure that it will yield enough."

"Then, we will move again - until we find a better place!"

Malenski looked at him sharply.

"To the south you mean?"

"That would be the only way to go - we can't go back!"

Yuri Kemerov had led his guest to the only concession to comfort the hovel boasted. Malenski obeyed the gesture to be seated and leaned back on the pile of blankets he had been offered. He stared at his host for a moment.

"You sound as if you've given a further move a lot of thought."

Kemerov nodded slowly.

"I think about these things. I look at the land and I look at the sky and I feel the icy wind coming down from the north. There is no place for us to go back to - nor to the east and west - only to the south.

"I have been looking to the south, all I see are ice covered mountains."

"Those who ran away from us when we came, knew the way to cross them!"

Malenski threw back his head and laughed.

"I like you, brother Yuri - you are what I would describe as a cautious optimist! It would do some of my advisors good to hear you!"

There was an interruption - a small woman appeared from a rear door. She looked as if she had hastily changed into what remained of her finery from former days.

"This is my wife, brother Malenski - Elena Kemerova."

Another Elena! To hear the name was a shock, Georgi kept a pleasant face and took her hand in the old-fashioned gesture of salute. He looked into her timid eyes. She was small and weathered and he read sorrow and

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despair - almost defeat. She didn't remind him of the other Elena - it was as well.

"Sister Kemerova, I thank you, that you have received me into your home."

She almost whispered a response.

"You are most welcome, brother Malenski."

She retreated into a corner and listened to her husband and the tired looking, intense man they were calling a biblical monster, continue with their conversation. Malenski continued where they had been interrupted.

"I have to confess that my advisors have become no more than yes men - they no longer advise."

Kemerov eyed him steadily.

"Do you need their advice? Do you act on their advice when it is given?"

Once again, Georgi contemplated him.

"You might be right - perhaps, I am the only one who can make the decisions - their advice has no relevance."

"They know that - and so, they no longer advise, instead, they do as you say - can you blame them?"

Georgi shook his head. Elena Kemerova took the opportunity to retreat to the kitchen. She was a little surprised to find that she was shaking. Her husband was courting disaster, by speaking to openly to the all powerful man who had virtually invited himself into the sanctuary of their home. In the other room, she heard Malenski ask the question:

"If you were one of my advisors, what would you suggest I should do?"

The response was slow in coming, considered and precise, it was her husband's way.

"I would advise you to get rid of your advisors!"

There was a pause and then Malenski laughed softly.

"What should I do with them?"

"In the past, you must have trusted them enough to have listened to them. You control vast lands and you care for millions of people. You can't hope to look after them all yourself. I've heard how you go from place to place, trying to watch everything. It isn't possible, you need trusted men to act on your behalf. Make them your governors - and make your own decisions!"

Georgi nodded slowly and eyed the simple man who faced him across the dimly lit room. Yuri Kemerov stared back placidly.

"Answer me this question: What if suspect that one of my so-called governors is starting to behave in a way that opposes my orders. What should I do with him?"

Again, there was a pause.

"You first have to admit that you made a mistake in giving him authority - that's your fault! Then, you must watch him - and then, you must remove him."

His hostess chose that moment to enter with a large pan of soup which she set down on the floor between the men. She bustled out and returned with a loaf of coarse bread, some knives, bowls and a ladle. She set them down, and then knelt between them with folded hands. Her husband showed signs of discomfort for the first time. He cleared his throat.

"We always ask the Lord to accept our thanks."

Malenski nodded.

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"As do I, brother Yuri - please follow your practice."

It was the first time that he had knelt in prayer since he had eaten with Elena on the last night they had been together - the night when she had told him that she was to bear him another child. He listened to Yuri confidently thanking God for the provision of the pitiful supply of food, which was all they had to nourish them. He listened to the petition for blessings and the thankfulness that they could sit together in fellowship for the meal.

He listened, but he felt aloof - he was no longer part of the body of believers. His faith had been frozen out of him by the experiences across the Siberian plains, and much more than that, by the sure knowledge that he had accused his God of being the author of all the suffering which was being endured by countless millions. It was frozen out of him by the certainty that he was Gog and that his destiny was to encompass the Camp of the Saints and that he was to die, together with an unnumbered Horde, in a fire storm from heaven, on the Plain of Esdraelon.

Later, they slept in the communal room. There was no accommodation for guests. To say they slept, was a polite euphemism for the night of watchfulness they kept on each other. They laid down in the cold and darkness and made a pretence, but that was all. Malenski's thoughts were upon Elena. It had been months since she had taken his son away. He tried to calculate how long and came to a rough valuation. She would be very close to bringing the new child into the world - perhaps, that was why she had elected to stay in Jerusalem.

He had no worries that she wouldn't be treated with consideration and respect. He knew he could rely on his friend, Michael, to ensure that she was well housed and cared for. He thought about his subconscious description of Michael as being his friend. Was he still his friend? Were they not destined to meet in mortal combat in the final battle? His mind wandered to a story from the distant past, in the time of the first Apostles of Jesus, when there was a terrible persecution of the early Christians. Some were forced to fight each other in the arena to satisfy the bloodlust of the onlookers. Christian brothers were forced to thrust their swords into each other. Some, it was said, even bared their chests for their brother's sword. He wondered if it would be the same between himself and Michael. Who, he wondered, would bare their chest?

He rose as soon as it was light, from the thin pad of skins which was all they could offer for a bed. His host and hostess did the same. They stood facing each other, their nostrils steaming in the bitter cold. They didn't offer him breakfast, he guessed that they had nothing left and that they had stretched their meagre rations to supply him with the evening meal. He thanked them for their hospitality. He took the hands of Elena in his - they were as cold as ice - it reminded him of those of his wife, when they had crossed the Siberian plain. They wasted no words in parting, he knew they would never meet again. Yuri and Elena would have a story to tell in future days, of the night when Gog came to their dwelling and shared their meal.

Yuri walked with him to the Shuttle. On an impulse, Malenski turned to him and smiled.

"Before I sack all my advisors, do you have a last word of counsel!?"

Yuri eyed him steadily and took his time to respond.

"It still applies - that old statement - it is not good for man to be alone! My advice to you, Georgi Malenski, is to seek out your wife and son!"

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Malenski's smile faded, he clasped Kemerov's hand in farewell and then, without another word, entered the Shuttle. Kemerov watched it dwindle away in the sky and disappear. He stood for a while and then shrugged and turned. They all had to look to their own survival - Georgi Malenski to his and Yuri Kemerov to his - there was no profit to be gained by chewing on the words which had passed between them.

Michael and Leah had installed Elena Malenski and her son in comfort. To be precise, Leah had offered her old home in Jerusalem. Georgi had been right with his calculations, his wife was very close to giving birth. Leah spent a great deal of time with her. It wasn't so much that there was a close bond between them. Elena maintained a reserve which was based on self disgust. It was nothing she cared to speak about, but the knowledge that she was the consort of the man who was almost certainly Gog, made her feel unclean. The fact that she carried his child within her, was a further reason for horror.

She kept her thoughts to herself and even Leah wasn't allowed entry to them. There were many other things she kept to herself. There was a sense of foreboding. She felt that there was something not right with the child she carried. It had not been like this when she had been expecting Piotr. She had swollen up to an enormous size and there were times when the child didn't move for days. The midwives who attended her, were full of reassurances but they couldn't drive away the almost morbid certainty that she was not destined to bring the child to life.

She heard nothing from her husband. She knew that Michael had been meticulously correct and had ensured that Georgi had been told of her change of location. There had been not a single word in response, other than a cryptic acceptance of the message from an operator in Anatole Barenkov's base. She had no idea if Georgi had been close by, or whether it was the only remaining point of contact. As the days passed, she knew that Georgi must have received the message, but he had chosen not to respond.

Leah made daily reports to Michael.

"She says nothing, Michael. She keeps everything to herself. She is closed up tight and refuses to let me in. It can't be good for her or the child. I'm very worried about her. When I talk to the midwives, they're full of reassurances, but I don't think its good with the child. She is so large - the birth will be very difficult."

Michael leaned back from the communiqués he was studying. He rubbed his eyes and grinned at her.

"For once, I have to admit you have more of the answers than me - I don't know a thing about how large ladies are supposed to be when they're carrying their young!"

"She's not carrying her young - as you put it! She's growing a child within her - and she's soon going to bring it into the world! Why is it that men always seem to abdicate their responsibilities as soon as you've planted the seed!?"

Michael put up his hands in a gesture of defence.

"Now, where did that come from?"

"It came from a sense of outrage, if you must know! How would you like it if I was carrying a child and I wasn't sure whether I would live to put it into your arms?"

Michael's grin faded.

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"Is that what she thinks?"

"That's what I'm trying to tell you - I don't know what she thinks - she won't open up to me. Now and then, I get a glimpse of real fear. I feel so sorry for her, she's all alone - and her husband doesn't seem to care what's happening to her."

"Do you want me to try to talk to him? Perhaps, I could tell him that she needs him - "

"You know as well as I, the only response you will get from Georgi Malenski will be to tell you to send her home!"

There was a profound silence, which Michael broke.

"Do you want me to talk to her - for what good it would do? Damn it! Leah! I don't know the first thing about these things. I'd probably say all the wrong things and end up by making matters worse than they are now!"

She grinned at him, it was the first time she had seen him really flustered.

"I think you might be right, my darling! Perhaps, you'd better save counselling pregnant women until you put in some practice with me!"

36.

The image of Micah Perga dissolved into nothing and the holo-pad cleared of the subsequent haze of light. Michael sat motionless for a few moments. The so-called conference had been very brief and Micah Perga had been unyielding, some would have described his attitude as defiant. It had been with extreme reluctance that Michael had initiated the request for discussion, in the first place. Circumstances had driven him to do so, but he might as well have saved himself the effort. He spoke aloud in the empty room.

"I presume you have a recording of our discussion?"

An anonymous voice responded through the communication link to the control room.

"That is correct, brother Michael."

Michael collected the holo-cube and returned to his office. Strictly speaking, it breached protocol to replay a private conference between Administrators, without the agreement of both parties. On this occasion, he was quite ready to break with convention and allow his advisors to air their views on the outcome. They stood around the room waiting for him to join them. He gestured to chairs and then took his place behind his desk.

"You are aware of the reason why I talked with brother Perga?"

There were silent nods.

"Our latest information is that he continues to make raids on the towns along the southern coast of the Grecian polders. I have no idea of what he thinks he can gain by so doing - and I'm still no clearer as a result of talking to him - perhaps, you'd better hear what he had to say."

He inserted the cube in a reader and waited for the three dimensional image to form in the cleared space in front of his desk.

Michael had entered the conference room first and was seated waiting

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for his fellow Administrator to materialise. It was not long in coming, clearly, the technicians had eliminated the protracted period of waiting to which he had been subjected. Micah Perga had emerged from a haze of light and had sat silent and glowering, in apparent proximity. In reality, he was several hundred kilometres distant from Jerusalem, in Nile City.

There was the usual polite form of greetings, neither of which sounded very sincere. The formalities over, Micah had come to the point.

"I understand you have something to say to me, brother ben Levi. Can we bring this discussion to the point and make it brief? I have a great deal to occupy my time."

"I agree, brother Perga, we are both busy men. I will ask you directly, what is the purpose of your raids on the southern European coast?"

There had been a moment of hesitation.

"Call them pre-emptive strikes - call them what you will - call them a protection of my interests in the ports under discussion."

"Your interests?"

Perga allowed a hint of sarcasm to touch his reply.

"I DO have interests - commercial interests - I presume you have agencies in these ports as well, it shouldn't be any surprise to you when I use the term!"

Michael ignored the sarcasm.

"Do your interests justify armed raids on the territory of another Administration?"

Perga leaned forward.

"When my agents are butchered without mercy and when the Administrator concerned seems incapable of dealing with the hostile forces who have invaded his territory - yes, I do believe I am justified in trying to correct the situation - even if it does result in sending my forces into the territory of another Administration - more especially, when the territory in question, has been appropriated by another Administration with questionable legality!"

Michael eyed him steadily.

"I think you are inviting retaliation, brother Perga - I'm sure you haven't forgotten what happened the last time you tried unilateral action against Pik Sedova!"

There was an interesting rush of blood to the face of Administrator of the Nile, it began in his thick neck and flooded to his temples. It was clear that he was having great difficulty in keeping the conversation on diplomatic terms.

"I can assure you, brother ben Levi, that I will teach this so-called, upstart general of Gog a salutary lesson. Especially if he tries to cross the Eastern Basin and bring his rabble into Africa."

Michael nodded.

"As long as you remember the words of prophecy, brother Perga - especially the description of what you must expect if he comes for the third time into the Kingdom of the South - the consequences will be disastrous!"

"For him, perhaps - not for me! I bid you farewell!"

The recording ended abruptly. Luke permitted himself a low whistle, there was an uneasy shuffle from the rest of the advisors. Michael looked from one to the other.

"No one can accuse me of not trying to reason with the man - he's

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courting disaster. Sedova will retaliate, of that we can be certain."

Luke broke the profound silence.

"Michael, this raises a very pertinent point. You laid a great deal of emphasis on scriptural prophesy. Answer us this question: - What good does it do to talk to Micah Perga, or anyone else for that matter, if we are of the firm conviction that the prophesy is going to be fulfilled? Couldn't it be argued that Micah Perga is driven to do what he's doing and Sedova will be driven to respond - it's the mechanism by which the prophesy will be fulfilled. You could say: 'for thus it is written!'"

Another of the circle interjected.

"Luke has a point, Michael. This reminds me of the interminable discussions we had in the last days of the Kingdom. There were some who could not be persuaded that the prophesies would be fulfilled exactly as written and were quite sure that God would change his mind - I think they quoted His change of heart about the destruction of Nineveh. There were others who were equally adamant that everything would occur as written - you must admit, Michael, that so far, everything has occurred according to the written word - so, isn't Luke right? What good does it do to talk to people like Perga? They are driven to do what they must do and accordingly, prophesy will be fulfilled!"

There was a murmur of assent. Michael nodded.

"As I remember, it was our good friend Joshua Aristides who held the view that God would change his mind. Asher and Joel Steinbecker were equally certain that he would not. I think they said that the outcome wasn't negotiable! Very well, brothers, I take your point - from this time forward, I will stop trying to salvage the situation and allow events to follow their predestined course. It isn't possible to be the conscience for the rest of mankind - they must answer for their own actions and we must answer for ours!"

When he was alone again, he keyed in the co-ordinates for the words of prophesy:

'At the time of the end, he and the king of the south will make feints at one another, and the king of the north will come storming against him with chariots and cavalry and many ships. He will overrun land after land, sweeping over them like a flood, amongst them the fairest of all lands, and tens of thousands shall fall victims. Yet all these lands (including Edom and Moab and the remnants of the Ammonites) will survive his attack. He will reach out to land after land, and Egypt will not escape. He will gain control over her hidden stores of gold and silver and all her treasures; Libyans and Cushites will follow in his train.'

Even though he knew the wording almost by heart, the text sent a chill down his spine. They faced the 'time of the end', the 'King of the South' was already making 'feints' against the 'king of the north'. Micah Perga was faithfully complying with the words of Daniel, when he sent his armed raiders against the overrun European ports. The retaliation of which Michael had warned him, would surely come, Pik Sedova would never allow such a demonstration of defiance to go unchallenged. Without a doubt, a great army would be gathered and then the final resistance to Gog, would crumble away. He would 'reach out to land after land and Egypt would not escape'.

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Michael cancelled the scrolled display and squeezed his eyes wearily. He was at a total lose to explain how a man as well versed in scriptures as Georgi Malenski, was so blind to what was taking place. Pik Sedova could be excused, perhaps he didn't have the depth of knowledge - the spiritual insight, but Georgi ought to see what was happening. Perhaps, he didn't care anymore, perhaps, he had already resigned himself to the inevitable. Perhaps, Luke and the others were correct, there was no point in trying to alter the tide of destiny. Perhaps, they all had hooks in their jaws, which drove them on relentlessly to complete the train of events which would culminate on the Plain of Esdraelon.

The news from Elena wasn't good when Leah joined him that evening.

"I think its only a matter of days before the child is born. The midwives fuss around and put up a great pretence that they know what they're doing, but I'm sure Elena isn't fooled. She's become unnaturally calm - she's always had that great wall of reserve, but this is something quite different. I don't know how to put it exactly - she's - she's surrendered! If something goes wrong, I don't think she'll fight - "

Michael took her hand.

"Then, we mustn't allow things to go wrong, get other midwives if you think it will help."

"You don't understand, Michael! There are no other midwives, we've had all there are to be had - I even called the one who attended me with John and Rachael, from Salem. At least, she's been open with me. The child is too big - Elena can never give birth in the normal way!"

"Then - there has to be an alternative way - women have been giving birth since Eve - they must have carried big babies before!"

Leah shook her head.

"What do you think we are? We haven't got a bag of tricks - if one way doesn't work, we try another! The only alternative - is surgery!"

He stared at her.

"I remind you, Michael, we could find no one to save Asher. We have no surgeons - we've lost the art!"

She left him in order to look in at John and Rachael. He sat for a long time before he came to a decision.

The message he sent to Georgi Malenski was carefully worded. Michael had no idea where he was to be found. His latest information on Georgi's location was, as usual, several days old. He prayed that the communiqué would reach him before the birth started, but as the hours passed with no response, his optimism faded. It was either the case that the message had not got through - or Georgi Malenski had elected to ignore it.

On the following evening, Leah returned home with Piotr on her hand. Michael greeted him and won a shy smile from the solemn little boy. He looked up and raised a questioning eyebrow. Leah shook her head and escorted Georgi's son to join her children. She came back after a while.

"Elena asked me to bring him here. Her excuse was that she didn't want him around when the birthing started. It makes sense, but I'm sure she has another motive. She clung to him when they parted, as if she knew she would never see him again!"

"I hope you're exaggerating!"

"I don't think so - a thousand or more years ago, her attitude would have been described as a death wish."

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"I wish we could do something to raise her spirits - to reassure her. Has the birthing started?"

"Not yet."

"There might still be time."

"Time for what?"

Michael stared out of the window.

"I've sent a communiqué to Georgi."

"Telling him what, exactly?"

"That Elena needs her husband during what could be a difficult birth!"

"You did that without consulting her?"

Michael turned almost angrily.

"I think the question of her survival is a greater priority than the delicate state of her relationship with her husband. Georgi should be with her!"

Michael had chosen the usual route of contact through Anatole Barenkov's Vistula headquarters. The message was received, duly recorded, subjected to a perfunctory inspection by a junior, rather bored aide, who, in any case, had a profound belief in the divinity of his master and his correctness in sending the woman Elena away. The message was considered of trivial importance and placed in a pile of general correspondence which the great man might or might not inspect at some future time. So it was, that Georgi Malenski never received the communication which might have brought him to the side of his stricken wife.

Malenski was preoccupied with the southern pincer which was applying part of the stranglehold on the last remaining area of Alexander Barenkov's stewardship. To the north, the other arm had come to a standstill. The wintry conditions in the Carpathians threatened to delay the advance across the mountains until the return of more clement weather. In any case, the northern pincer was comprised of farmers and a few armed escorts. Georgi would have liked to have reinforced them by detaching some of the battle hardened troops from the Sedova force, but the constant harassment of the Grecian ports made that impossible. The situation brought him to the camp of his general for the first time in several weeks.

He was received with elaborate courtesy, but he was not fooled. Sedova still ruled, together with his cohort of Scandian captains. Gubkin and his companions were under suspicion and had been quietly manoeuvred into positions which had them scattered through the small sieges being mounted against the strongholds which had not surrendered. It might have been the time for Sedova to remove his commander, but he held his hand, he still had a use for the organising genius Malenski undoubtedly possessed. Sedova made a great show of consulting with his commander. On the evening of Georgi's arrival, a conference of the captains was called. Malenski looked around them, they were, in the main, Scandians and Sedova's picked followers. He eyed them, one after the other, whilst listening to Sedova's summation.

"Every few days, our southern enemy runs supplies to the Aegean strongholds - at the same time, he lands diversionary forces at various places along the polders and runs sorties against the garrisons. I'm forced to keep too many men tied down to watch my rear. I can't supply enough men to the bring sufficient pressure to cross the Balkan Mountains - if I could, I promise you, I'd hand Alexander Barenkov's head to you on a platter!"

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Malenski nodded and stared steadily into the blood streaked, muddy eyes of his general.

"I've heard your complaints, brother Sedova - what are your proposals to resolve the problem?"

Sedova bared his broken, yellow teeth in an unattractive grimace which was supposed to be a grin.

"I could ask you for time to train another hundred thousand men, brother Georgi - but I think you're an impatient man."

"You already have approaching four hundred thousand men! What would you do with another hundred thousand? We still need farmers to plant the crops to feed you."

Sedova's grin widened.

"Brother Georgi, with your farmers, we could return the favour, by invading our enemy to the south - and this time, we would not come back without all the food and supplies we needed - then, you could have your hundred thousand farmers back!"

The Scandian captains were smirking. Malenski eased down on to his back on the pile of skins upon which he had been sitting, crossed his hands behind his head and stared up at the flapping tent roof. He felt the eyes of the silent captains on him. He was a vulnerable target and open invitation for a knife thrust - but he sensed their uneasiness. He was too confident and that had them off balance. There was a long silence, before he propped himself on one elbow.

"I remember a conversation we had not so long ago - one which led us to change direction. Your advice was good then, Sedova. You told me that the south was the way to go - now you are telling me the same thing, but this time, we will face a determined enemy, not a few farmers led by an ineffectual steward.

To cross the Eastern Basin, will bring us into direct conflict with the forces of another Administration. Before you advise me to take this course of action, I want you to be very sure that you can handle the challenge. One thing more, you will not have an extra one hundred thousand men - you will have to conquer Egypt, Libya and the lands beyond, with the resources you have. The only concession I'm prepared to make is, that we will hold the line along the Balkan Mountains with a minimal force - no more than a garrison - and they had better be good men, your rear will need to be well protected. The rest of your men, you can redeploy to teach Micah Perga the lesson he so richly deserves!"

Sedova and his captains gaped for a few seconds and then erupted into a scream of jubilation. Sedova roared:

"By the god the women love, Georgi - I didn't think you had the guts! Forget the head of Alexander Barenkov, you can have that latter - this time, I'll give you the head of Micah Perga."

Malenski nodded quietly, he held aloof from the general uproar of approbation. Sedova sensed there was more to come. The position had changed, he was content to humour the intense man who confronted him, he sent his captains away to spread the news through the camp. It would serve a double purpose - it would raise morale - and there would be no way that Georgi Malenski could change his mind. He was almost in a convivial mood when they were alone.

"Will you drink with me, Georgi?"

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Malenski nodded. Sedova poured a generous measure of the rotgut brew which was distilled in the camp. He watched as Malenski swallowed a generous portion.

"You seem to have changed, Georgi - there's something different about you."

"Different? In what way?"

Sedova lounged back and leered at him.

"I don't know - perhaps, you've taken a woman!"

Malenski stared back.

"I haven't taken a woman, Sedova - I need no women - Tell me about this god the women love!"

Sedova stared at him and then stared at the ceiling.

"You can't tell me you haven't seen what they've put up on the hilltops? You travel around. I'm told that every hill is crowned with them these days!"

"Crowned with what?"

"To put it politely - fertility poles!"

Malenski tipped the remainder of his drink down his throat and slowly extended his glass. He didn't lower his eyes from those of his general. Sedova topped up another liberal refill.

"And - these are supposed to represent the god loved by women?"

Sedova was becoming quite expansive.

"What else do you expect from simple people - we haven't all got a high education. I admit, there wasn't much evidence of it during the last thousand years, but the people have always seen the need to make sure the fields are fertile and that the harvest will be good. You would be the first to admit we have need of good harvests - so the people go back to the old ways - and enjoy themselves at the same time!"

Sedova erupted into a baying laugh. Malenski smiled and nodded.

"I suppose you'll tell me next that there's a goddess beloved of men?"

"You can bet your sweet life there is! One thing our Scandian comrades have taught us, is to value the old ways."

"So the Scandians brought their gods with them?"

Sedova became serious.

"Don't blame the Scandians - these fertility gods were called by many different names in all parts of the world - it's part of our basic nature - just as is the tilling of the soil and the need for a good harvest - it's basic!"

Malenski sipped down the remainder of his drink.

"And - it was one of these things you erected on the Temple Mount in Jerusalem?"

Sedova became stone cold wary.

"Correct! We showed them that we can penetrate right into the centre of their sacred city and that there's no one who could stop us!"

Malenski nodded slowly.

"But someone will stop us one day, Pik Sedova - and there is nothing you or I can do to change it!"

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Michael had the greatest difficulty in resisting the impulse to wipe the smile off the face of the man standing across the desk. It hadn't been so much what had been said, as the overtones of contempt it had contained.

"I understand congratulations are in order, Administrator. You have finally united with my father's widow. There would not be many men inclined to take responsibility for a woman and another man's children - one might make the observation - a ready made family!"

Michael hadn't echoed Gideon's smile.

"I am quite sure that you are relieved that you no longer have the responsibility for your father's wife and children, brother Steinbecker."

Gideon laughed softly.

"I wasn't aware that I ever had - you so admirably took on the task at the earliest opportunity!"

Michael matched the smile this time.

"Not quite the earliest, brother Steinbecker. Leah took a little persuasion - but, as you so pointedly remarked, I finally managed to convince her. Of course, you are mistaken, as the head of the Steinbecker clan, you did have the responsibility."

Gideon looked uncertain for the first time.

"It is you who are mistaken I think, my dear Administrator, I have never described myself as the head of the Steinbecker clan."

Michael nodded slowly.

"Perhaps, I am premature - you haven't yet attempted to advance your undoubted claim to that honour."

"I fail to understand where this conversation is leading."

"My apologies - I haven't given you the opportunity to state your business."

"My business is on the usual subject, to demand the release of my sister, Deborah - or to demand that you formally charge her with whatever crime you have trumped up against her."

Michael eyed him with a slight smile.

"Am I to understand that your 'demand' is only for the release of your sister - or perhaps - as the head of your clan-family, you wish to 'demand' the release of your cousin David - and perhaps, your sister's lover, Kurt Weber!?"

Gideon glared at the assured man facing him.

"I have no particular interest in the other two!"

"You surprise me, brother Steinbecker. They are to be charged with the same crime as that of your sister. If I release your sister, I will be forced to release them."

Gideon pounced on the sign of concession.

"You have in mind to end this farce and to release Deborah?"

Michael nodded.

"It is an option - which will carry certain conditions."

"Conditions!"

Michael manipulated a holo-cube controller.

"Before we continue the conversation, I want you to take a look at two interviews. I believe it will help you to understand my decisions concerning the disposal of the detainees."

Gideon Steinbecker glowered at him, all trace of a diplomatic facade

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gone.

"Go ahead, ben Levi! Let's get this over with!"

Michael casually tossed a holo-cube into the air and caught it expertly. He repeated the manoeuvre and the light sparkled on the shining, spinning surfaces. Gideon stirred restlessly.

"I am suitably impressed with your display of manual dexterity, ben Levi. I presume it the purpose of your demonstration?"

Michael smiled and slowly inserted the cube into the recorder, he pressed the start control and relaxed back into his chair.

"This is a statement by Leah Steinbecker, taken shortly after her release from captivity.

A holo-form of Leah Steinbecker took shape in the space in front of Michael's desk. She looked tense and very pale, but she faced the recorder resolutely. An image of Michael was seated opposite her.

'I want you to tell me in your own words, what has taken place during the past few days.'

Leah nodded and leaned back in the chair.

'I suppose I'm stupid, I didn't suspect anything. There must have been warning signs but I was blind to them. Lately, Rebecca had established a pattern. You know this silly fetish about 'taking tea'? Well, she would arrive every afternoon at about the same hour with her tray of goodies. We would sit together and sip and nibble and make small talk - mostly about the children. It was because of them that I made the point of being home early whenever I could manage it. Rebecca was gaining far too much influence with them and I was beginning to feel shut out - so I decided to do something about it and make a point of being home in time to put them to bed.

On that particular afternoon - do you know, Michael, I don't even know how long ago it was? On that afternoon, Rebecca arrived as usual and went through her ritual. She was a little more talkative than usual and whilst I sipped my tea, she chattered on about something the children had done earlier in the day. I complained of feeling a little dizzy and she just sat and watched me until everything went out of focus and I passed out.

When I regained consciousness, I was in a bedroom, laying on the bed. I have no idea of how I got there. It was a strange room and I soon found that I was locked in. When I tried the windows, I found that they were locked shut and that they looked out over countryside I didn't recognise. It was then that I started to panic.'

Michael leaned forward.

'Take your time - what happened then?'

'I was left alone until it grew quite dark. I thought of all manner of things to get out of the room. I shouted at the door but no one answered. I even thought of smashing the windows and climbing down the outside, but then I realised that it wasn't the ground floor and there was no balcony. I didn't know where I was. I had no idea who was keeping me locked away - except that Rebecca was somehow involved. I sat down and started to try to piece things together. The best I could conclude was that someone had taken the trouble to move me from the estate to another location, therefore, they wanted to keep me alive. It was small comfort!'

She paused once again.

'Deborah opened the door about two hours later. David Steinbecker stood behind her. I knew it was useless to try to fight my way out. David didn't

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look all that happy about the situation, but Deborah was her usual vitriolic self. She was so self-assured and arrogant, I felt like clawing her eyes out!

'What did she have to say.'

'She said that my time was over. She made no attempt to hide the fact that she and Rebecca were working together. She gloated over the fact that I would never see my children again. Rebecca had them and she would control them. Gideon would take his rightful place as the head of the Steinbecker Clan and Deborah would have her place of honour.'

'She actually involved Gideon?'

'If we can take what she said as being accurate.'

'Which raises the question whether Gideon knew what was happening.'

'I wouldn't doubt for a moment that he was involved. Both of them have always hated me for 'entrapping' their father. They have always considered Rebecca to be their second mother. When Judith died, it was Rebecca who should have been Marcus's second wife - not some upstart girl cousin!'

The recording finished and there was a heavy silence in the room. Gideon Steinbecker laughed harshly.

"You are, of course, aware that the hearsay evidence of a witness, has never held credence before any judge - What Leah surmised about my involvement, is not evidence."

Michael nodded slowly.

"Possibly - but clearly, your cousin David and your sister are directly involved and accused."

"The evidence would require cross examination."

"Perhaps, we will move on to the next interview."

"By all means, let's have an end to this farce!"

Michael touched the controller and the holo-shapes took form once again and this time, resolved to show him sitting in much the same position. Standing in front of him was Deborah. Michael gave a soft commentary.

"This is a recording of the first interview with your sister. I had just told her that your cousin Rebecca had escaped arrest."

The image of Deborah on the recording was proclaiming:

'Rebecca was always a step ahead of you all. I knew she would escape - you will never catch her!'

The image of Michael answered:

'You are quite correct - we will never arrest Rebecca and she will never be brought to account for her crimes - that is, not here. I can see that someone has neglected to tell you - Rebecca is dead, she blew herself apart playing with one of those devices which she planted on the suborbiter in which your father was travelling. She had hoped she could kill me and the children - and those travelling with us - but she miscalculated. I think you would agree, that was very careless of her.'

The image of Deborah had gone deathly pale and she swayed slightly. Michael left her standing in the centre of the floor. His image continued:

'So, my question is this - were you in conspiracy with Rebecca to cause the death of your father, just as you were in conspiracy with her to kidnap his wife? I'll add another - Did Rebecca engineer the death of Judith, your mother, and were you also involved - you and your brother, Gideon?'

His stare was relentless. She whispered.

'I do not believe one word of what you have just said!'

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'It is of no interest to me whether you believe me or not - the facts will speak for themselves. My interest is to find out the extent of your complicity in these crimes - your's and your brother's.'

'I will tell you nothing! Absolutely nothing!'

'I would hardly expect you to do so - but you will remain under my personal supervision until you decide to open your mouth.'

There was a return of the former fire.

'I wouldn't be so sure, Michael ben Levi - I wouldn't be so sure!'

Michael switched off the recorder.

"It is always so interesting to look back on such interviews, don't you think, brother Steinbecker?"

Gideon smiled in return.

"I note that my sister did not provide much information about so-called conspirators - you must be disappointed!"

Michael eyed him steadily.

"That was only the first interview, brother Steinbecker. Put all together, your talkative sister was very informative."

Gideon stood up abruptly and towered over the seated Administrator.

"Then I repeat, bring your - conspirators - to trial, or release my sister. That is your option!"

Michael eased back and smiled at him.

"I intend to do neither, brother Steinbecker - but I have arranged a reunion for you all!"

He reached out to the control pad and passed his hand across it. A few moments later, the door panel slid across to allow the entry of Deborah, Kurt Weber, David, Luke and two militia men. The brother and sister exchanged glances but said nothing. Kurt Weber remained uncharacteristically silent. David, as usual, looked as if the bottom had dropped out of his world. They all turned their attention to the steady gaze of the man seated behind the desk.

"So good of you to join us - your brother and cousin has been most anxious about what I intend to do with you."

Deborah spat out with her usual venom.

"I predict nothing! You haven't a leg to stand on!"

Michael smiled.

"You are entitled to think so. I can call many witnesses to vouch for the fact that you had imprisoned your father's wife, Leah, at your property in Gazera. The same witnesses can also vouch for the fact that our brother Weber, figuratively speaking, galloped to your rescue - and made treasonable threats against me, as his Administrator. David implicated your cousin Rebecca in the murder of Marcus Steinbecker and made interesting observations about the role Gideon had to play in Leah's abduction. All in all, you measure up as an unsavoury bunch of criminals - and I propose to deal with you as such!"

Gideon smiled grimly.

"I doubt if you have the power - or the resolution to do so, Administrator ben Levi."

Michael purred.

"I can assure you, I have no intention of making you martyrs, dear brother Gideon. I do not intend to confine any of you - or even to order your execution!"

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David whimpered. Deborah snarled.

"Shut up, David - you snivelling coward! Can't you see, he's trying to bait us?"

Michael leaned forward.

"You are mistaken, sister Steinbecker - I now intend to pronounce sentence."

Gideon snapped angrily.

"I warn you, ben Levi!"

Michael ploughed on, ignoring the interruption.

"My decision is very simple. I have decided to make you non persons! Firstly, you will be expelled from the area of my Administration - that is, from the stewardships of the Central and Far East Administrations. Secondly, all property and assets under your control will be frozen, they will be inaccessible to you within my Administration.

You will be conveyed to the port of Elat on the Gulf of Aqaba and will be transported to the nearest port in the Administration area of Micah Perga. What you do after that, is your own affair - but you will be denied re-entry to my Administration. Should you be so foolish as to attempt to return, you will be apprehended and deported."

There was a moment of stunned silence - then pandemonium broke out. Michael waited until the shouting died down. Gideon was white with fury.

"You exceed your authority and we will demand access to our assets - and remain within your Administration, if we so choose."

Michael nodded.

"It would be interesting to see you try. You have already been deemed unauthorised personnel. Your retina scans have been reclassified in the Administration's Central Computer. Any attempt to identify yourselves for any purpose, will activate alarms, which will bring security militia within seconds. You will be unable to use any facility - accommodation, obtaining a meal, the Pod Transit System, access to Shuttle or Suborbiter services - anything you can name. As I said earlier, from this moment forward, you are non persons!"

Deborah Launched herself across the desk, a spitting bundle of venom which was restrained by the two militia men. She wrestled to shrug herself free, Michael nodded and the two men eased their restraint. She spat out:

"You will not get away with this!"

Michael stood and the smile was gone.

"I can assure you that I will! - Perhaps, it's time to remind you of a little story from the book of Genesis. You might remember that Cain had killed his brother, Abel. You could call it a family disagreement which got out of hand because of jealousy - not unlike your own circumstances! Cain was expelled from the scene of his crime - it is recorded that he went to the Land of Nod and there took a wife. A mark was set upon him and it was forbidden for men to do him harm.

I am expelling you - I will not send you to the modern Land of Nod - that is within my Administration Area, and I see no reason why they should be plagued with you - instead, I will send you elsewhere. I will not put a mark upon you in the physical sense, but you will become outcasts with whom nobody will deal. I have removed your access to the amenities you have previously enjoyed.

I mentioned that you will be taken to the port of Elat. There, you will be placed on a slow transporter to a port on the far side of the Red Sea. I advise

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you to look to the mountainous mass of Sinai as you pass and reflect that I could easily have dealt with you according to the Law which Moses received from our God, upon that holy mountain!"

He gestured to the Luke and the militia men and the group were nudged out of the door. Before he passed through the entrance, Kurt Weber turned and smiled slowly. He hadn't said a word during the interview. Michael was startled to see that the smile was almost friendly - perhaps, even approving! The door closed on the group and he sagged back in his chair, tilted back his head and closed his eyes in exhaustion. He jerked back to alertness when Luke entered a few minutes later. His secretary wore a broad grin.

"You might have struck them dumb in here, but it didn't last very long outside! Madam Imperious started squawking the house down! Big brother started ranting like a wounded bull. David whimpered and snivelled his way to the main entrance - and the craziest thing of all, Kurt Weber was laughing loud enough to have him committed to a funny farm!"

Michael twitched a smile, Luke had that effect on him.

"You have a colourful turn of expression - I'll have to put your talents to work when we advise Micah Perga to expect important but unwelcome guests!"

Luke sobered up a little.

"I suppose they won't even be able to access their personal baggage?"

"Correct, they will leave my Administration in the clothes they are wearing."

Luke shook his head, his expression was a mixture of wonderment and respect.

"I must say, Michael, you're quite a surprise. You've dithered around for months and I was beginning to doubt whether you would ever make a decision about Deborah and her friends - in one fell swoop, you've trimmed them down to the level of paupers and managed to haul in the net on that bombastic brother of hers."

Michael nodded absently.

"I wonder how long it will be before those good friends fall out? David will be the first one to be jettisoned, I think. You could see how Deborah despises him. Kurt Weber is a pragmatist, I think he'll soon cut adrift - he won't want to be associated with losers. Gideon and Deborah will stick together, but it won't be a happy family relationship - Never mind! Let's not waste any more time on them, we have other things to worry about."

The 'other things' came in a variety of forms. By far the most interesting was a series of reports from Alexander Barenkov. It was reassuring to see that he still considered himself to be a part of the Central Administration. He had fought a series of tough rearguard actions against the forces of the Sedova army and had been instrumental in slowing down the relentless advance. Michael was under no illusions that he would be able to turn the tide. Sedova had too many men at his disposal and from all accounts, the number was building daily.

The reports from Alexander all conveyed the same message. The relentless pressure was being eased. Apart from a few forays into the southern Balkan Mountains, the invaders appeared to be holding back. Weather conditions were worsening in the area, but somehow, Michael doubted if this was the only reason. In the course of the following days, the

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picture started to take shape. There were a few, brief communiqués from the hard pressed centres holding out in the midst of the Aegean polders. They reported a build up of forces along the southern coast. Coupled with the build-up, there were other reports of a convergence of shipping, laying off the dozen or so ports under Sedova's command.

"It points to one thing, Luke - Micah Perga is about to be repaid for his ventures against the southern ports. What does the prophesy say?"

'At the time of the end, he and the king of the south will make feints at one another, and the king of the north will come storming against him with chariots and cavalry and many ships.'

Luke nodded grimly.

"You warned him, Michael - he wouldn't listen. What do you intend to do - tell him what's happening?"

Michael shook his head.

"I think we agreed that we must let things take their course - the prophesy must run true. On the other hand, I'm quite certain Micah isn't uninformed - he had a perfectly good spy system in place in Alexander's stewardship - Wasn't that his excuse for making the raids?"

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"If you read further, it begins to sound like an avalanche - listen to this."

Luke had entered the co-ordinates of the prophesy. The dispassionate tones of the computer intoned:

'He will overrun land after land, sweeping over them like a flood, amongst them the fairest of all lands, and tens of thousands shall fall victims. Yet all these lands (including Edom and Moab and the remnants of the Ammonites) will survive his attack.

He will reach out to land after land, and Egypt will not escape. He will gain control over her hidden stores of gold and silver and all her treasures; Libyans and Cushites will follow in his train.'

"It has to come, Luke. There's nothing we can do to stop it - even the 'fairest of all lands' won't escape, 'and tens of thousands shall fall victims' but it appears to be limited - perhaps only a major, probing attack. Look at what the next phrase tells us:

'Yet all these lands (including Edom and Moab and the remnants of the Ammonites) will survive his attack'

"I don't call that very encouraging, it sounds as if we are going to take a mauling!"

"I can assure you that it will be nothing compared with what will

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happen to Micah Perga and his people!"

Luke wandered to the window.

"And into that turmoil, you sent Deborah, Gideon and David - and Kurt Weber - perhaps, your punishment will have lethal implications after all, Michael!"

The answer was slow in coming.

"Perhaps - Tell me Luke - What place would those four have had in the Camp of the Saints, when Gog launches his final assault?"

Luke turned and looked at him squarely.

"I thought Judgement was reserved to the Time of the End, Michael - or have you suddenly developed the ability to look into the hearts of men and see if they are guilty or innocent!?"

Michael returned his stare without blinking.

"I hope you're not going to join the general chorus of complaint, Luke! In the absence of any other authority, or indication about what should be done, I have taken what I believe to be appropriate steps. One way or the other, we all have to face the future. I may not be able to look into the hearts of men to see if they are innocent or guilty, but I am also not able to predict their destiny. They may or may not become involved in the assault Gog is about to make on Egypt - I can't know that. I punished them - but I left them their lives!"

He related the conversation to Leah, later in the day. She was silent at the end of it. He moved restlessly in his chair.

"Well! Don't you have something to say?"

"What do you want me to say, Michael? That I approve of the way you handled my abductors? That I agree with your taking away their privileges of citizenship? That I think Luke was wrong to suggest that you've become a judge? Honestly, Michael, I don't know whether you did right or wrong. There are some things which are too hard to put into comfortable categories. Only time will tell - and the only approval which matters, is that which you will or will not receive before the Godly Throne!"

The silence was heavy between them for a while. It was some time before Michael asked:

"How is Elena?"

"About the same - you have heard nothing from Georgi?"

Michael shook his head.

"I can't understand it, Leah. Surely, he would have made some sort of reply - even if it was simply to say: 'I'm not coming.'"

"What do you intend to do about it?"

"What can I do - I can't force the man to acknowledge my message!"

"Send another - somewhere other than where you sent the last."

Michael nodded slowly.

"I could try New Athens - we have had no communication with them for weeks but it might be worth a try. Malenski ought to be with his main force."

"With Sedova's army - Do it now, Michael!"

He looked at her sharply.

"Any particular reason?"

Leah hesitated.

"She needs him - now!"

Michael got up without another word and went to the communication centre. For good measure, he not only sent a copy of the original message to

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New Athens, but to a dozen more port cities along the southern coast of Greece. He mentally urged Georgi to respond, he couldn't shake off the feeling of foreboding about the impending birth. When he returned to where he had left Leah, he found that she was gone. One of the house servants told him:

"She received a message - Sister Malenski has started her labour!"

Elena Malenski was in labour for seventy-five hours. At the end of that time, she managed to give birth to her child, it was a boy, but it was so traumatised by the struggle for birth, that it died after a few minutes. Elena was extremely weak. The long months of privation and starvation, took their final toll. She lost the battle for her own life and followed her new son into death a few hours later. Leah had stayed with her for the entire time, but the man Elena had desperately wanted to see, failed to come. Elena slipped out of life, unable or unwilling to remain any longer. From Georgi Malenski, there had been no response to the urgent messages Michael had ordered to be sent on a repeated basis.

Leah returned to her home in the Judaeen Hills, she was totally spent. Michael led her into a small reception room which faced out over the darkened valley, where once she and Marcus had listened to the communities singing psalms of praise and of peace. It seemed an eternity from that time of tranquillity and love. She was very quiet at first, not enlarging on the bare facts which had already been conveyed to Michael. He held her in his arms and said nothing. She felt numb, she had lived through the desperate fight for life, every step of the way. Elena had tried so hard, but the child had been too big for her, and the midwives had had insufficient skill, and there was no one who could help her. Eventually, the tide burst and she wept for the sheer futility of what she had witnessed.

Michael held her and let her expend the grief. When she had quietened down, she asked.

"What is going to be done about telling Georgi Malenski - and Piotr?"

"First things first, Leah. I will get hold of Georgi, one way or the other. He MUST be told - as for Piotr - he must be told too - and beyond that, Georgi must make the decisions about his son."

He felt her stiffen in his arms.

"You won't allow him to take the boy away!?"

"He is the boy's father, I can't refuse to allow him access to his son."

"No, Michael! You can't allow Piotr to go to that monster - Elena fought so hard to keep him away from the influence of war and armies and the glorification of conquest."

Michael repeated emphatically.

"We have nothing to say in the matter, Leah. Georgi IS the boy's father. He has the right to do as he pleases with his son - and as yet, he hasn't been proved to be the monster you think he is!"

She eased back from his shoulder and stared into his face.

"Sometimes, I don't understand you - There isn't the slightest doubt in the minds of most of the people to whom I talk, that Georgi is Gog. You simply refuse to accept the evidence which is staring you in the face. How many more deaths, or evictions from property held for centuries, or rapes and pillage, are you going to ignore? Georgi Malenski is Gog - and Piotr has no place with him!"

"I repeat - Georgi is the legal guardian of his son and I have nothing to

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say!"

"Then, I will have plenty to say if he shows his nose here to claim his son. I will tell him of a desperate woman who tried so hard to bring his child into the world, and who lost the battle before it began, because of the indifference of the man she loved, who couldn't be persuaded to leave his army of conquest to come to her side when she needed him. I will tell him how she whispered his name at the moment she died. I will tell him of the ebbing away of gladness and joy, which shone in her eyes when she finally gave birth, until it was taken from her with the knowledge that the child wouldn't breath. I have a lot to tell Georgi Malenski - and not even you, Michael, will stop me!"

She fled from the room and Michael was left to stare into the darkness which shrouded the garden. He thought out what had to be done and then called Luke. He appeared very quickly. Michael waved a hand over the lighting control and stared at him. Luke's expression was heavy with sympathy.

"I suppose you heard what Leah said?"

"Sorry if I intruded on your privacy - it's just that I've learned to be close by at this time of the day - it seems to be the time when you have your best - or your craziest ideas and need someone off whom to bounce them."

Michael smiled slightly.

"It sounds as if I made one of my more intelligent choices when I asked you to take over from Simon - he had much the same sort of philosophy."

"Philosophy?"

"Best summed up as: Keeping Michael from making a thorough ass of himself and steering him in the way of prudence and diplomacy - I must tell you, he didn't always succeed - and neither will you. Sometimes, there are circumstances which demand neither prudence, nor diplomacy - and I rather think this is one of them!"

Luke held his peace and waited.

"I want to know where Georgi Malenski is to be found. I won't take any excuses and I don't care if you work the staff until they drop. I don't want to deal with his underlings, or even his second-in-command. I don't want to know where he was yesterday, or where he might be. I want to know where he IS - so get to it, Luke. We have a long night ahead of us!"

He looked in on Leah. She was in bed and very quiet. He wasn't sure whether she was asleep or laying awake in the darkness. He didn't adjust the lighting control, instead, he left her and closed the door manually. He went back down to the communications centre. Luke was at work with three assistants. He didn't disturb them either, instead, he returned to the reception room and tried to work out what he was going to do. Over two hours later, Luke appeared at the door of the half lit room. Michael adjusted the lux and looked at him quizzically.

"Malenski is in New Athens - He was positively identified as flying in six hours ago. He's been closeted together with Sedova and his captains for the past three hours. I would suggest they're putting the final touches to their plans for the invasion of North Africa. We haven't tried to organise contact - I would suggest that if we tried, we would receive the run-around from his aides - So, what do you want us to do now, boss."

"Contact New Athens and tell them to expect me in two hours, at which time it is imperative that I speak face to face with Georgi Malenski on the

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subject of Gog - and other matters!"

Luke nodded, he was white to the gills.

"I guessed that you had something like that in mind, Michael - and it simply can't be allowed!"

Michael eyed him mildly.

"And who intends to stop me - you?"

Luke shook his head.

"Not me, Michael - Leah!"

Michael shook his head slowly.

"Leah won't stop me - I've made up my mind!"

"To commit suicide!"

"My time isn't now, Luke - Now, if I was to send you, I might not be so confident - you might be slaughtered by Sedova's men - but not me. It isn't my time!"

"Fatalistic mumbo-jumbo! If someone sticks a knife into you, you'll die like anyone else!"

"But no one will even try, Luke. So, prepare a Shuttle - I will travel alone - STOP ARGUING - I will travel alone - and if you value your position with me, you will keep these arrangements confidential!"

Luke glowered at him, opened his mouth to protest, thought better of it, turned on his heel and stalked out of the room. Michael watched him go and smiled a little. Luke was becoming a good friend. He had meant what he said earlier, he had made a good choice.

He managed to get away from the house without rousing Leah. His departure from the Salt Sea Terminal was equally private. The message to New Athens had been relayed to every other reception station within two thousand kilometres. There were many people who were being roused from their beds to hear the news that Michael ben Levi was on his way to parley with the man they were all calling Gog.

Two thirds of the way across the Eastern Basin, he picked up an escort. He saw them converging upon him from a number of bases along the Grecian coast. In a matter of seconds, it would be determined whether they would shoot him out of the sky, or whether they would afford him due diplomatic privileges. When a dozen or more Shuttles formed into a loose formation around him, he was sure that he would soon come face to face with Georgi Malenski.

It wasn't immediately so, his Shuttle was escorted to a terminal close to New Athens. It was still dark, so he could see nothing of the ancient treasures which still remained from over three and a half thousand years earlier. He was much more acutely aware of the large man who greeted him. Michael eyed him squarely. He had no doubt in his mind that this was Georgi's general. Pik Sedova bared his yellow, broken teeth in an unattractive grimace. Michael assumed it to be a smile.

"Welcome to New Athens, Administrator ben Levi."

"I thank you for your welcome, Pik Sedova."

There was a slight jerk of surprise.

"You know me?"

"Who hasn't heard of Pik Sedova, the colleague of Georgi Malenski, who is demonstrating such military genius in this time?"

Sedova wasn't used to the diplomatic niceties. He jerked his head in acknowledgement.

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"Then, you will know that the purpose of this visit is already doomed to failure, we have no intention of listening to pleas that we should hold our hand against those who are determined to stand in our way."

"And that is what you believe to be the purpose of my visit?"

Sedova glowered at him.

"What else?"

"I have something for the ears of Georgi Malenski - a private word which concerns him personally - and nothing to do with the plans for the conquest of North Africa and Egypt!"

Sedova jerked again and then the unattractive grin returned.

"We have no plans of conquest, Administrator ben Levi."

"Perhaps not, brother Sedova - but Gog has!"

Sedova stiffened.

"Are you accusing us of being Gog?"

"I wasn't talking of accusations, brother Sedova, but of prophesy. Gog is going to invade North Africa and Egypt, nothing and no one can stop it. The word will be fulfilled!"

Sedova looked uncertain, Michael calmly waited for an answer.

"I don't know about prophesies, or what this Gog is supposed to do. I only know what I intend to do!"

"Which is no concern of mine, brother Sedova - you must do what is in your heart - and I must do what is in mine. At the present moment, what is in my heart is to speak with Georgi Malenski."

A voice came from behind him - it was one he knew.

"And so you shall, Michael ben Levi!"

Michael turned on his heel. Georgi was standing a few paces away, directly behind him. Michael had no idea how long he had been standing there, listening to the conversation. Michael nodded a greeting.

"I am happy to meet you again, Georgi."

Malenski nodded and gestured to a Pod which had been brought into the reception area.

"We will go somewhere more private."

Michael turned back to Sedova, he caught the barely suppressed expression of contempt which had been directed at his commander. Michael felt a sudden chill down his spine, Georgi was walking on a tightrope.

"Thank you for greeting me, brother Sedova - and for given me the opportunity to speak with you."

Once again, there was a terse nod of uncomfortable acknowledgement. Michael turned away and entered Georgi's Pod. They moved out of the reception area and gathered speed. It was just dawn and the light was enough to outline Malenski's profile. He looked even more emaciated than before - but the intense nervous energy was still there. In Michael's estimation, he would not have slept in the previous twenty hours - or even more - but he still radiated an almost frenetic energy.

"You are lucky to get away with your life, Michael. I think Sedova was intrigued when he knew you were coming. He senses that you will ultimately oppose him and his army. If Gog is infamous, you are also famous - you are the one who stands up for his people. Sedova is intrigued with you, but perhaps I came at the right moment."

Michael murmured.

"So, Jonathon did save David, after all."

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Georgi glanced at him and smiled slightly.

"Jonathon was always bailing out David - read your books of the prophet Samuel!"

Michael smiled back, but it was difficult - he knew the easy relationship would soon end when he had broke the news about Elena. Georgi's next comment was casual.

"I'm quite sure your dangerous trip was not motivated by the desire to pay a visit to strengthen our friendship."

"Dangerous?"

"The Eastern Basin can be a treacherous area to cross in the dark."

"Perhaps - but my reason was urgent."

They had arrived in front of a small house set on the side of a hill. There were no guards in evidence. Georgi either saw himself as a man of destiny, or he was extremely indifferent about his own safety.

He led the way into house, room after room illuminated as they entered. Georgi tossed an explanation over his shoulder.

"The previous owner preferred to rely on his body heat to activate everything, rather than waving his hands around."

He gestured to a recliner and poured two drinks from a decanter. He silently offered one to his guest.

"Before we get down to the pressing business which has brought you on your night mission, let us share a drink - as friends."

Michael nodded and held his glass high in a silent toast. He threw the liquor down his throat. Georgi eyed him steadily for a moment, then:

"So, Michael - what is it? Are you going to appeal to me to stop the invasion of North Africa!?"

It was a challenge as well as a question.

Michael shook his head.

"You either will, or will not, go ahead with your plans - it isn't the reason why I am here - Tell me, Georgi, have you received any of my messages?"

Georgi shook his head slowly.

"Messages? The only message I have received was handed to me this evening. I was also told that it has been relayed around most of the Mediterranean - so it was hardly private! But, I understand your caution."

"I have sent other messages, spaced over the last three weeks - they were urgent - but we received no response."

Georgi set down his drink and stared hard into Michael's sober face. He whispered:

"So what was in your urgent messages? Has something happened to Piotr - or Elena?"

Michael nodded grimly.

"Which!?"

"Elena - I am so sorry to tell you, Georgi - she had a difficult time in the birth of your child - she is dead!"

It was incisive, it was clean, it was brutally factual - the word was said - she was dead.

Georgi's face was frozen into immobility. When he managed to speak, his voice was a rasp.

"And the child?"

"A boy - he also died!"

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He explained softly, what had happened. The desperate messages sent, but which had never been received, the battle Elena had fought and lost. Georgi sat hunched in his seat and stared at the floor. When Michael was finished, he looked up and stared at him.

"I thank you for all you tried to do for her - now, please, I want to be alone for a while. You will find a room at the back, there you can rest."

Michael hesitated, he wanted to reach out to him - to offer some sort of comfort.

"I wondered if we could pray together?"

Georgi's face was contorted in anguish.

"I no longer pray - what use is it to pray to a God who does not listen to me? I have no god, read your prophecies! Gog worships a god his ancestors didn't know - the god of the citadel and the fortress! Conquest! - that is my God!"

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Michael found a room and slumped down on the bed fully clothed. He listened intently for noises in the silent house. Once or twice, he thought he heard Georgi moving around, but it was in a distant part of the premises. It was nearly dawn and he resigned himself to the fact that he had lost another night's sleep. He was haunted by the last outburst of the anguished man he had left alone with his grief. When it was light, he returned to where he had left Georgi. He wasn't there, but another man rose to his feet when he entered the room.

"Greetings, Administrator ben Levi - I am Nicholai Gubkin."

Michael nodded acknowledgement.

"Greetings, brother Gubkin - what can I do for you?"

"It is perhaps, a question of what I can do for you."

Michael waited for more.

"Brother Malenski has put me at your disposal."

"I see - or rather, I don't see. Where is brother Malenski?"

Gubkin shrugged.

"He has left New Athens - no one knows where he is."

"That was very sudden - I was talking with him no more than three hours ago!"

Gubkin smiled a little.

"Brother Malenski is known for his sudden movements, Administrator."

Michael pressed for more information.

"And you have no idea where he can be found?"

Gubkin nodded.

"He took his Shuttle towards the north-east - that is all we know."

"We?"

"My fellow captains."

"So, you are an officer in Pik Sedova's army?"

"I am an officer of the militia who accompany our displaced brethren,

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under the orders of brother Malenski!"

Michael looked at him sharply. Gubkin's Tartar face was inscrutable.

"And brother Malenski has placed you at my disposal?"

"To accompany you to the transit terminal and to ensure that you are - processed - in an orderly fashion - these are troubled times."

Michael nodded. His work was done in the domain of Gog, but he would have liked another opportunity to talk with Georgi Malenski. There were many unresolved matters, more particularly, the Committal of Elena - and what was to happen with Piotr. He realised with a sudden pang of conscience, that he had left the task of explaining the death of the boy's mother, to Leah.

"Very well, thank you, I suppose I had best place myself in your hands and return to Jerusalem as soon as possible."

Gubkin nodded and moved to the door. Michael took one last look at the room where he had broken the news of Elena's death. It was modestly furnished, there was no sign of the opulence one might have expected of a conqueror. Malenski lived modestly, it was almost as if he realised the futility of amassing treasures. His time was short and he knew it. His sudden departure had been unexpected - but then, Georgi had always displayed the will-o-the-wisp attitude of darting from one theatre of his operations to another. It was almost as if he was so driven by his demons, so that he found it impossible to stay in one place for any length of time.

Gubkin maintained his silence for the short ride to the terminal. They were not challenged, even by the squads of militia lounging at makeshift barricades, which had been pulled aside to let them pass. Michael wondered if Georgi had suspected a move from Sedova. Some display of histrionics, which would have involved the visitor's capture or death. If so, he had provided one man to safeguard him. Unless Gubkin commanded much more clout than was obvious, it seemed hardly enough. They arrived at the terminal without incident. Gubkin escorted him to his Shuttle and extended his hand in farewell.

"Until we meet again, Administrator ben Levi."

Michael nodded.

"I hope we will meet again, brother Gubkin, thank you for escorting me. If you should meet with brother Malenski soon, give him my greetings and tell him that the Committal of his wife will take place in two days time in Jerusalem and that he can be assured of safe passage, should he choose to attend!"

The look of shock which registered on Gubkin's face, told him that the death of Elena was news to him. It was replaced by an expression of commiseration for his absent master and then, the blank, polite mask he had worn until that time.

"I will be sure to give him your message."

Michael nodded.

"I'm quite sure you will, brother Gubkin - once more, farewell."

Michael entered his Shuttle and took his time to ensure that he was completely alone. There were few places where anyone could hide on such a craft, but there was always the chance that Sedova might have tried to secrete an agent on board, so that any mischief would be done well out over the Eastern Basin. There was no way he could check that there wasn't some sort of explosive device, it could be lodged where he couldn't check - or for

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that matter, that the power drive itself hadn't been sabotaged. Michael reminded himself that it was not yet his time. Sedova's treachery - if there was any - would not, could not succeed.

He lifted the Shuttle clear of the Terminal and pointed directly towards Jerusalem. The coast of Greece fell away rapidly behind him. He watched the scanners for signs of accompanying craft, but there were none. He looked below, he was flying over an armada of transporters and smaller craft. He hadn't seen them when he had arrived, but they had been there, hidden in the darkness. Now, Sedova wanted him to see the extent of the force which would be pitted against the luckless Micah Perga. Perhaps, he even wanted him to report the extent of the fleet to his fellow Administrator, knowing that it would, at least, strike anxiety, if not fear, into his heart. Michael made the resolution - he would not do so. He had no intention of trying to warn and counsel. The prophesy had to be allowed to come to actuality without his interference.

He made good time to the outer polders along the eastern shore of the Basin. There had been no sign of hostility, but he was quite sure Sedova had known of his departure and his lone flight across the sea. If there had been any tampering done to his Shuttle, it would surely be timed for disaster, so that it was in full view of the citizens of Jerusalem. What better way to strike fear in their hearts, than to blow apart their Administrator before their eyes.

He landed safely at the Salt Sea Terminal and evacuated the Shuttle quickly. Luke was waiting for him. His face was taut with strain, it relaxed when he saw him. The relief in his voice was obvious.

"Welcome home, Michael!

Michael cut him short.

"Luke, organise a thorough check on the Shuttle - and tell the technicians to be very careful - tell them to treat it as if it had been booby-trapped! I can't be certain, but Sedova might be tempted to try to prove a point and it could be that the Shuttle blows apart when it's having a standard check."

Luke eyed him sharply and hustled him away from the ship.

"If you suspected that - why in hell's name did you fly the thing?"

"Because I had no alternative - and because Sedova does do things in hell's name - as you have so eloquently put it!"

They entered a Pod and Luke issued instructions through the communication system. He eased the Pod into the traffic stream and then turned to his employer.

"You look ready to drop."

"I didn't go there to sleep."

"I don't suppose you did - but did you succeed in meeting Malenski?"

Michael nodded grimly.

"I did - and I met his military commander."

"Pik Sedova!"

"He made a particular point of greeting me at the terminal."

"What's your first impressions?"

"One of an uncouth lout, who might have military genius - either that, or he's been very lucky. Either way, he has an armada waiting to invade the North African coast."

"And Malenski?"

"Georgi hasn't changed - a little thinner perhaps, but he still has this

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fixation that he is Gog and nothing can shake it."

"Then, Michael, why fight it? You always said that you wouldn't call him Gog unless he called himself that - or started to act like Gog. I think he has satisfied your conditions on all counts!"

Michael changed the subject.

"What's been happening here?"

"War has come to your house!"

Michael looked at him sharply.

"Meaning?"

"Meaning - that you had better put up a breastplate of righteousness and a good shield before you go through the door. You have a very displeased spouse!"

Michael groaned.

"How did she find out so quickly - I haven't been gone more than eight hours? I suppose you told her!"

Luke eyed him calmly.

"What was I supposed to do? If I'm asked a direct question, I have to give a direct answer. I'm sorry, Michael, you don't pay me enough to lie for you!"

"I don't pay you at all! - You're right, Luke - you don't have to lie for me."

They were climbing the escarpment of the Judaeen Hills, behind them, the white salt plain glared in the morning sunlight. It was good to nose into the wide valleys, still green with the richness of a triple harvest in every year. It was likely to be the last peace and quiet he would enjoy until Leah quietened down once more. The anticipated explosion of wrath raised his anxiety level several notches.

The house came into view and he drank in its beauty. He had emerged from the ravine which led to it countless times during his three hundred plus years of life. It had always looked the same, a place of tranquillity, almost timeless - as if it existed in its own time and space and was separated from the turmoil which flowed around it. There was no one to greet him at the door when he stepped out of the Pod. That in itself, told him that he was in for a stormy reception. He entered the house and walked through into his office. Leah was waiting for him, sitting in his place behind the broad desk. He eyed her warily.

"You look tired."

"I am - very tired."

If he had expected to be showered in sympathy, it was a forlorn hope.

"Are you surprised?"

"No - I'm not surprised - I haven't slept."

"Did you enjoy your trip?"

"Not much - it served its purpose - even expanded my knowledge - but I wouldn't call it enjoyable when you have to tell a man his wife has died!"

Her lip quivered slightly.

"I wouldn't like someone to come and tell me that my husband had died - not a second time!"

He moved round the desk quickly and took her into his arms. She pushed him away.

"You didn't give any thought about that did you, Michael? No thought about how I would feel for these past few hours, not knowing if you were alive

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or dead! Not knowing if you were captive, or worse, being tortured by that bestial Sedova! You didn't think of me waiting for Luke to come through the door to tell me that you had been blown out of the sky! No, you didn't think of any of these things - because you had to act the hero, charging off to a man you claim to be your friend, but who will meet you one day on a battlefield!"

She sobbed against him. He whispered into her ear.

"I'm so sorry, Leah - I couldn't think of anything else to do - Georgi had to be told about Elena - and I wanted to tell him to his face - I would want even my worse enemy to come to tell me if ever anything happened to you!"

She pulled back so that she could see his face.

"I imagined so many different ways you could have died, during those hours - and I think I died with you - "

He cradled her and told her all that had happened. She listened quietly and when he had finished, pulled away.

"This man, Gubkin - he told you that Georgi went towards the north-east?"

Michael nodded.

"If you're thinking what I am, that means an attempted visit to Feodor."

"Or a return to Gorki - "

"Perhaps - You do realise that Feodor doesn't know - about Elena, I mean."

"You said - an attempted visit to Feodor."

"Feodor isn't at his base. Kharkov is under threat - he would more likely be to the south - near the Crimea."

"Malenski would know that - his spies would tell him."

"Perhaps, I can't quite work out why he would want to meet Feodor - he must know the danger he would run, walking into the camp of the enemy."

"You would know all about that, Michael! As to why he's looking for him - Elena left Georgi to go to Feodor - his spies would have told him that Feodor was paying far too much attention to her. Perhaps, Georgi is so devastated by her death that he thinks Feodor encouraged her to leave him - and now, he wants to level the score!"

Michael touched the desk control. Luke appeared after a few moments, he looked a little relieved to see that a state of truce had been declared between the combatants. Michael explained the theories for Malenski's flight.

"So, you see, Luke, I must talk with Feodor immediately. Malenski has a head start on me - I can only hope that he's having trouble tracking Feodor down."

"Feodor's with Alexander, Michael. I had a communiqué a few hours ago. They're at one of the advance bases in the Carpathians. I'll request an immediate holo-link."

The Committal was set for two days later. It was only a small group who gathered to pay their last earthly respects to Elena Malenski and her child. Apart from Michael and Leah and their children, there was Luke and a dozen or more senior advisors, together with an ashen-faced Feodor Chernienko. He held Piotr by the hand.

Michael and Leah together had broken the news to Elena's son. He was a grave little boy and Leah's thin veneer of control had nearly broken when she saw his determined effort to be courageous. Michael drew him into his arms, the boy's grim determination to suppress his emotions, made him look the image of his father. He had surrendered and had wept and it had

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been some time before he could be comforted. When Feodor had arrived, he had gone to him. Michael wondered if the child had sensed the embryonic relationship between the Cossack and his mother. Feodor was a picture of pale faced misery. It was very clear that he had taken the news of Elena's death very hard.

Now they stood together in a tight circle around the bier which carried Elena's body. Her child had been placed in her arms. It was a beautiful picture of peace. Leah felt an unbearable tightness in her throat, she fought down the surge of emotion which threatened to choke her. Michael was waiting, she wondered why - it would serve no useful purpose to prolong the proceedings, one could almost touch the atmosphere of grief. She followed Michael's gaze to the door. He had made a slight gesture and the two militia guards stepped back from the man who had tried to enter.

Georgi Malenski moved slowly into the room and the circle parted to allow him through to the bier. Piotr broke free from Feodor and ran to his father. Automatically, Georgi placed his arm around the child's shoulders and together, they looked down at Elena's serene features and those of her child. Leah placed her hand over her mouth, it was as much as she could do to prevent from sobbing out loud. Luke gripped her arm, the shock of the contact helped her to recover her poise. Michael's voice sounded loud in the silent room, although it was barely a murmur.

"Is it your wish to make the committal, brother Malenski?"

At first, Leah thought that Malenski hadn't heard and then, he shook his head briefly. Michael stepped forward and took his place at the head of the bier. He began the well known formula.

"It has pleased our Father to call home the soul of this woman and her child. If it had been left to our will, we would have rather that they would have stayed with us - but we have surrendered our will into His - "

Michael continued and Leah looked into Georgi's face. It was a mask of suppressed emotion, frozen, expressionless. He was listening to the words Michael was speaking, but Leah had the peculiar feeling that he wasn't accepting a word that was being said. Georgi Malenski was going through the motions of the Committal Rite, he was with them physically, but that was all. The words of comfort Michael tried to convey couldn't penetrate the thick armour he had built around himself. Nothing was touching the inner man. Leah wondered if the inner man still existed - the man whom Elena had longed to come to her and who had failed her when she had needed him most.

The ceremony had taken place in the garden of the house in the Judaeen Hills. Elena and her son were laid to rest near to the grave of Asher. The rest of the assembly drifted away and left Georgi and Piotr standing alone at the burial place. Michael stood a few paces away. After a moment's hesitation, Leah followed the others towards the house. She was startled to witness what appeared to be a wrestling match between Luke and Feodor. The Cossack was white-faced with fury and Luke held him in a painful grip. She heard the tail-end of the argument. Luke was making a point quietly.

"I warn you, Feodor - I'll break your arm unless you cooperate! You WILL NOT approach Georgi Malenski for any reason - is that clearly understood? Michael has given express orders that you are to be kept away from him - and I intend to see that those orders are carried out. Michael has guaranteed him safe passage - and I am here to ensure that you do not

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breech that guarantee!"

Feodor's answer was a little louder.

"Guarantee! What guarantee of safety have those who have been hustled out of their homes and have had to abandon their possessions on the Russian plains? What guarantee did they have when they were made homeless by the orders of that vulture!? What guarantee did he give to Elena and Piotr that they wouldn't be caught up in his madness to conquer every town and village he chooses? What guarantee did he make when he gave her another child and then drove her away because of his attitude towards her? She died because of him! She loved him and he killed her love - and then he killed her with his neglect! Michael says, I am to do nothing because he has given a guarantee. That being the case, I won't stay under his roof - or under his Administration! I will do what I have to do and Michael ben Levi will learn how much I think of his precious guarantees to a wife murderer!"

He wrenched himself free and stalked towards the house. Leah caught up with Luke, who was staring after Feodor's retreating back. Michael's aide shook his head.

"That is one very headstrong man, whose temper will be the death of him, one day."

"Feodor has always been impetuous, Luke."

"This time, I think he means it. He will no longer take Michael's orders. He'll try to stand against Gog alone - and that can only end in disaster!"

They looked back at the burial site. Malenski had turned aside from the grave of his wife and child. He stared at Michael.

"I thank you for the words of Committal, Michael."

"Our God will give you comfort, if you will allow Him, Georgi."

Malenski shook his head slowly.

"I think not, Michael. I have abandoned your God - he is no longer my god. I have had many long evenings to come to the way of thinking that man, because he believes he is a species which is special in the scheme of things, cannot bear to think that he is like any other animal. His reasoning is based on his own pride. He thinks that because he believes himself to be special, he must have been the product of some specific creative act - and if a specific creative act, then, there must be a personal Creator. His reasoning continues: If there is a Creator, this Being must be God, who must be so far higher in the scheme of things, that he is omnipotent. Man's final vanity is that he believes he was created in the image of that supreme being.

In the end, we all come to this - returned to the ground to moulder away - and nothing remains!"

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Michael stared at him.

"I wonder if you really believe that, Georgi. I wonder how you explain to yourself the wonderful teaching and Godly benevolence which we enjoyed for a thousand years. How do you explain away the Firstlings - how do you

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explain away the relationship God has had with man for over seven thousand years?"

"I don't seek to do so, Michael - any more than I can explain away the death of a woman in childbirth - a woman who was guiltless, who bore a child who was most certainly guiltless - and yet they lay here, dead! Was she and the child punished because of the sin of Gog!?"

Michael trod carefully.

"We are talking about weighty matters, my friend. Perhaps this is neither the time nor the place for this discussion.

"On the contrary, Michael. What better place for such a discussion than at the side of a grave - into which one has placed loved ones? According to your way of thinking, their existence continues and they are still with us, hovering and listening to what we have to say - and they are in possession of the answers which we mere mortals strive to find all the days of our lives. They must be listening with interest - and perhaps, even with a little amusement!"

"Perhaps they are, Georgi - but that contradicts your argument that we are nothing but a special form of animal which returns to the ground and knows nothing. I say once more, this is not the right place or time for such discussions."

"Perhaps, this is the ONLY time and place we have left, Michael. Whilst I am still Georgi Malenski, I must attend to some last matters - please listen and do not interrupt! We both know our destinies, Michael. We can no longer bluff ourselves that we can somehow change them. You have already become the great Prince who will stand up for your people and I have already become Gog, who will oppose you! The final phase is about to commence.

When I return to my camp, the third excursion against the 'king of the south' will be launched. Eventually, we will face each other again on the Plain of Esdraelon. It is now, in these last precious moments, whilst we are still Michael and Georgi, that I want to remind you of a story from the books of Samuel."

Michael nodded and gestured to a low wall. They took their seats, with Piotr between them.

"Between us, we have tried to make a comparison of ourselves with David and Jonathan. I am well aware that it was a ploy on your part to try to win me away from my destined course. I don't criticise you for that, my friend, it was a good try! You must realise that our courses cannot be changed!

However, let us keep up the pretence for a few moments longer. Let us imagine that we are still David and Jonathan - but we must already set our story a little further forward in time - Jonathan is already dead on the field of battle. David has mourned for him. A little later, he asks: 'Is any member of Saul's family still left, to whom I can show true kindness for Jonathan's sake?' To cut a long story short, he was told that one son still remained: 'There is a son of Jonathan still alive, he is a cripple, lame in both feet.' The son of Jonathan was named Mephibosheth.

I have also son - I want you to show him the same kindness as did David in that old story. I want him to have a place at your table and in your home. Piotr does not belong with Gog. Elena could see it, and she took him away. I want him to stay with you and Leah - and to visit the grave of his mother and brother in my name. Especially when Gog has served his destiny and no longer is a menace to the Camp of the Saints!"

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Michael looked at him in wonderment.

"And you try to pretend to me that you have no God!"

Georgi's answer was brittle.

"Remember your prophecies - my god is the god of the citadel and the fortress - the god of Conquest. Your God no longer has thoughts of loving kindness towards me - for me He has only hooks in the jaw! I ask you, Michael ben Levi - will you care for my son - or must he die with Gog in the firestorm from Heaven!?"

Michael whispered.

"It will be my honour to care for your son, Georgi!"

"Then, so be it!"

They stood and then embraced silently. Georgi took his son's hand and placed it into that of his friend. He knelt down in front of the boy and took his face between his hands. He kissed him on the mouth.

"I want you to stay with Michael and Leah, Piotr, my son! I want you to stay with them, because I have always loved you - and because you are all that is left of the love I still have for your mother. I can't help what I have become, but I want to be sure that I can think of you in safety, with people who will care for you as I have tried to care for you. I want you to remember me as your father - and not as some conqueror who tramples across the hearts of those who oppose him."

His voice faltered at the end and then he held Piotr close before kissing him again. The boy sobbed into his shoulder and it took a mighty effort of will for Malenski to stand and walk away without looking back. Michael saw Luke join him further along the path, to provide the escort back to his Shuttle.

Michael held Piotr close to him and wondered what further burden of grief could be laid on the shoulders of a child who was barely more than ten years old. He led him towards Leah. Malenski was gone, he felt his own sense of loss and grief, the fantasy of David and Jonathan was at an end, Michael knew he would never meet Georgi in peace again.

True to his word, the man who now called himself Gog, began his hostilities against the Administration of North Africa, within four days of his departure from Jerusalem. It was soon after dawn on the fourth morning, when Luke roused Michael and Leah with the news.

"Our agents got the message to us that a fleet of ships was on the move from the Grecian ports. There had been reports of a mass movement of men and materials over the previous twenty hours. Together with the seaborne movement, there has been an airborne invasion of the North African coast, somewhere on the western side of the old Gulf of Sirte. The fleet is heading in that direction. So far, they haven't met any large scale resistance from Micah Perga's forces, but that is probably because Micah couldn't be sure where the strike would come and he's spread his defences in a very thin line along the entire coast."

"Which means that Gog will obtain a foothold and he won't be dislodged easily!"

Luke looked at him sharply.

"Am I to assume that we are no longer to refer to them as the 'Sedova army', or the 'Malenski force'. Are we going to call them what they are 'Gog's Horde'!?"

"What does it matter, Luke?"

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"I would think it matters a great deal, Michael. It's a question of psychology and of morale. I think our militia would prefer to know who it is that they are fighting."

"Our militia will not be involved, Luke - We will keep out of it."

"Very well, Michael, but if I were you, I would reread the scriptures - especially if we ARE dealing with Gog's Horde on its third excursion against the King of the South!"

Luke made his exit, leaving Leah and Michael alone. She took his arm.

"Luke's right, you know. Scripture tells us very clearly that Gog will overrun land after land, sweeping over them like a flood, amongst them the fairest of all lands and tens of thousands will fall victims."

"Yet all these lands will survive, including Edom and Moab and the remnant of the Ammonites. Egypt won't escape, it will be pillaged - and he'll gain many recruits from the Libyans and the Cushites."

"It sounds very much as if Micah Perga will be swept away - and you have no intention of helping him?"

Michael shook his head.

"We will only use the militia when we are threatened - and then, only as a last line of defence. I am not destined to make war against Gog!"

Leah sighed and turned away to the window. The light was flooding the deep valley below the ancient house. It was a picture of utter tranquillity. The sky was clear and very blue.

"It's hard to believe that only a few hundred kilometres away, there is a scene of carnage and death - Oh! Michael, it mustn't be allowed to come here! You must do something!"

"I can only promise you, my darling, that this will not be the time when Michael will face Gog on the Plain of Esdraelon!"

Gideon Steinbecker, his sister, Deborah, his cousin, David and Kurt Weber, had been escorted to Elat on the Gulf of Aqaba and had been placed on a small transporter bound for one of the smaller ports on the Egyptian coast of the Gulf of Sinai. Gideon was an astute man and his anger had cooled very quickly after the encounter with Michael ben Levi, which had resulted in their expulsion from the joint Administration. He had been the first to realise that there was little which could be done in the short term to recover from the situation in which they found themselves. Deborah had been the hardest to quieten down - but then, his experience of his sister had always been that she was a very nasty piece of work when she was roused - and indeed, she was very roused!

Kurt Weber puzzled him, the man's attitude was almost one of gaiety, as if the outcome of their interview with ben Levi had been anticipated and even accepted. It didn't accord with his assessment of Weber, whom he had always held in grudging respect and had believed to be a man of iron will and determination. It had been for this reason that he had been accepted as a suitor for Deborah and included in their schemes to take over the Far Eastern Administration.

David Steinbecker was a nonentity, a willing, if witless accomplice, with whose presence they would soon dispense. For the time being, it was essential to stay together. The short journey from Jerusalem to Elat had proved it. At every turn, they had been confronted by a system whose use they had taken for granted for centuries. Now, it acted against them. Warning sirens had sounded at every access and exit. It was impossible to obtain

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food, drink, accommodation, transport, or any of a hundred different services to which they were accustomed. Even on the transporter, they were dependent upon the presence of personal who had to provide for their every need. Michael ben Levi had contrived a diabolically clever retaliation - Gideon refused to honour it with the term, punishment.

Their progress down the Gulf of Aqaba had been painfully slow. It was even slower than one could justify for even the slowest of cargo transporters on the shortest of trips. Gideon assumed it to be a part of the salutary lesson Michael ben Levi was trying to impose. He had mentioned something about the looming mass of the Sinai ranges which commanded the skyline on the right side of the ship, as it progressed down the Gulf. The impact of its presence was lost upon Gideon, but David had been reduced to an inarticulate and snivelling wreck. He was a man to be avoided - not so, Kurt Weber, whom Gideon found standing at the rail, admiring the view.

"I see you are taking in the view which ben Levi so graciously provided."

Weber didn't turn.

"He must have toyed with the idea of imposing the Mosaic Law on us. An 'eye for an eye' a 'tooth for a tooth'"

Gideon grunted in contempt.

"Not ben Levi - I doubt if he would have the guts! I pointed out to him once that he would have to find a judge and an executioner if he wanted to go along that particular path. I think he found the option too hot to handle."

"So, instead, he's given us a slow sea voyage during which we can admire the Sinai Massif and contemplate upon our sins."

"Or spend the time more profitably and come up with a plan to recover the situation as soon as possible."

Weber turned and smiled.

"I suggest we take one step at a time. I think a courtesy visit to Micah Perga is in order - I understand you know him."

Gideon nodded.

"I've had dealings with him. He likes people who have power and whom he thinks he can manipulate. Our reception will depend on how much he's been told about our expulsion. My guess is - nothing! A further factor in the equation will be the pressure he's under from the north. My latest information is that Malenski and Sedova have overrun Greece and are casting hungry eyes towards Egypt - enough to give our friend Perga indigestion - "

"And to look for valuable new friends."

"Precisely, Weber."

They turned their back to the rail and leaned on it, it was a subconscious gesture that the reminder of the Law of Moses and the Sinai Massif, were of no further interest to them.

Their arrival in Nile City coincided with the invasion of the Libyan coast. Perga's capital was in a turmoil. It had become much easier for the party of four, now that they were free of the jurisdiction of Michael ben Levi. The embargo on access to facilities did not apply in the North African Administration. It had been easy to obtain a Pod, which had taken them from the port of disembarkation, to the door of Perga's Secretariat. Now, they stood on the threshold and were confronted by a ring of steel in the form of grim faced militia who were under instructions to allow no one to pass on pain

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of death. Gideon didn't hesitate, he marched up to the Captain of the Guard.

"Gideon Steinbecker and party, with special communiqués from Michael ben Levi!"

"My orders are to allow no one access."

Gideon stared at him sardonically. The captain was young but very resolute.

"Very commendable, captain. Of course, you must obey your orders, but I think you would be wise to consider that you will cause a major diplomatic incident by refusing entry to myself and my party - and you may well be depriving the Administrator Perga of valuable assistance in dealing with the invasion of your territory. I would suggest that the very least you can do to retrieve the situation, is to send one of your men for one of Micah Perga's aides and allow him to take the responsibility from your shoulders."

The young captain looked uncertain for the first time. There was a moment of irresolution and then he gestured to one of the troopers.

"Get Achor Zerah - tell him we're holding emissaries from Jerusalem!"

Deborah purred.

"Tell him - we have critical despatches for the Administrator."

The trooper hastened up the steps and they were left facing the steady gaze of the captain. Gideon turned away and looked around casually. There was very little physical movement except for Pod traffic, but that didn't appear to be out of the ordinary. There was the sense of tension, which was almost physical. Pedestrian traffic was hurried, with none of the casualness one usually associated with a sophisticated, cosmopolitan place such as Nile City. There was the impression of looking over the shoulder to see if the alien hordes were sweeping through the streets and were about to overwhelm the innocent citizens.

The trooper returned, he was accompanied by a small man who appeared to be in his seventh century. He moved slowly and didn't seem to be very happy to interview unexpected guests. His peremptory tone conveyed the message.

"How can I be of service to you?"

"Greetings, brother Zerah! Greetings also, from our Administrator, Michael ben Levi."

The small man nodded and his demeanour changed a little.

"Of course, greetings to you all - how can I be of service to you?"

"We have dispatches from our Administrator to Micah Perga - important dispatches."

"I will ensure that he receives them."

Gideon smiled.

"You will please understand, brother Zerah - these dispatches were considered so confidential that brother ben Levi entrusted them not to one of us, but to all four - they are not in written form. We have memorised them - each a portion. We have also been instructed to deliver them in person, to your Administrator."

Zerah eyed him steadily.

"A very unusual method of correspondence - surely, the holo system would have been more suitable for such critical communiqués?"

Deborah laughed and the others smiled - even David.

"I'm sure you are well aware that the holo system leaks like a sieve, brother Zerah! Who, in their right mind, would confide sensitive material to

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that method?"

The little man looked in some difficulty about making up his mind. Gideon could almost see the wheels turning. On the one hand, he was suspicious of their intent - and on the other, there was always the possibility that he might cause a major diplomatic incident if he refused them entry. In the end, he applied a good, old fashioned compromise.

"I think you had better accompany me - and I will enquire if Administrator Perga is agreeable to seeing you."

Deborah purred.

"I'm sure he will see the value in doing so."

They were ushered into a small room and left in privacy. David sagged against the wall and looked as if he was about to fall apart. Deborah hissed angrily.

"Pull yourself together, you fool! I warn you, David - we'll dump you somewhere and you can manage on your own. I don't think you'll last very long if you get mistaken for one of Malenski's men!"

The implications were clear. David made a mighty effort to sit upright and appear calm.

They were left alone for over one hour. Gideon maintained a placid, resigned expression and held Deborah's eye when she showed signs of becoming restless. Kurt Weber had closed his eyes and had leaned his head against the wall. Of the four, he seemed the most relaxed. Gideon eyed him, his attitude in the face of discovery and possible execution, was one of casual indifference.

Achor Zerah returned eventually, his face revealed nothing.

"Administrator Perga apologises for the delay in receiving the delegates of his fellow Administrator. His time is at a premium at the moment, as I expect you will realise. He can spare you a few minutes, if you would care to follow me."

He had already moved to the door. The quartet got to their feet and followed obediently. They were led through a series of passages towards a plain door which was guarded by two militia troopers. Zerah waved his hand over a door control and gestured for them to enter. They found themselves in an anteroom and before the desk of another man. He rose and extended his hand.

"Greetings brother Gideon Steinbecker - and sister Steinbecker, brother David Steinbecker and brother Weber. Greetings to you all. The Administrator Perga will be available in just a few moments. Can I offer you refreshments? I understand that you have had some difficulties during the past few days - obtaining refreshments - and other essentials!"

Gideon outstared him.

"Difficulties? I think you must have been wrongly informed, brother. We have travelled secretly from Elat on a small cargo transporter - which was considered our best means of transport to Egypt in the circumstances. I would hardly consider the limited facilities as being difficulties, exactly."

The secretary smiled.

"Then, we must have been badly advised, brother Steinbecker. The Administrator will see you now."

He led the way to a pair of inner doors, which slid across to give them access to the large room beyond. Micah Perga sat at a broad desk, close to a window. He rose slowly and heavily and stood waiting for them to approach.

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He looked as if he hadn't slept for several days, but his eyes were sharp and watchful.

"I greet you all - A diplomatic messenger which arrives in quadruplicate, sounds a little like a bureaucratic nightmare, but it is intriguing, nevertheless. I understand you have informed my staff that you have a memorised message from Michael ben Levi, which you wish to recite to me - one which could not be entrusted to the holo system because of its sensitivity - and one which has caused you to travel secretly - by an extremely slow method. I am intrigued by the contradiction in terms - on the one hand, you have a secret message, which ben Levi wants me to have urgently - on the other, he chooses a method which will cause the greatest possible delay! Now, tell me the real reason for you wishing to gain entry. Let us dispense with this cock and bull story, which wouldn't deceive a schoolboy!"

41.

Gideon stared calmly into the face of the Administrator of the North African Area and took careful note of the bloodshot condition of his eyes, the almost grey tinge of his skin and the small beads of perspiration which filmed his forehead. He faced a desperate man, a man who already knew he faced the ultimate attack of the dreaded Gog. He was a man who would need to be played carefully. Gideon nodded without smiling.

"I can see that your reputation for being an astute man, was not exaggerated."

He was interrupted.

"I have no time to waste with listening to flattery, Steinbecker - or to deal in long drawn out verbal fencing matches! Let me tell you what I know about you. It might surprise you to hear that I know a great deal. You, Deborah Steinbecker, together with your two companions, have been held for a period awaiting investigation on certain matters. You, Gideon, have been attempting to secure the release of your companions - or to force the issue of having a determination made by ben Levi. I have watched his hesitancy with some degree of impatience. He appeared to be a man who was unable to handle a thorny problem. It is to the advantage of the other Administrators, that he finally decided to make a determination - "

Deborah interjected.

"A totally unjust and prejudiced determination, as I am sure you will agree, brother Perga."

Micah turned his sore eyes towards her and glared.

"I neither agree nor do I disagree. I observe that the decision to make an end to the matter, was as much for my benefit, and the benefit of our fellow Administrators, as it was for ben Levi! You will detect that I have little time for him. Perhaps, this is why you decided to bring yourselves to my attention. What did you hope to gain? You, Weber, are an experienced Steward, who is reputed to have cared for a responsibility in a capable manner. You, Gideon, have a reputation for hard dealing, but for integrity in your business affairs. You, David, were the secretary of a fine Administrator -

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Marcus, your cousin. You, Deborah - you are notorious for being a shrewish and contrary woman, filled with devious schemes and dirty tricks - So, you see, I have been well informed by my agents in Jerusalem - I know a great deal about you all!"

Deborah had gone through some interesting colour changes in rapid succession. Gideon suppressed the desire to explode into rage. Perga continued.

"So, the question is: How could I usefully employ you - you all have such a wide range of talents!?"

He appeared to be considering the question, staring at the desk top.

"First of all, before I make a decision, let us add further factors to the equation. You, Weber are implicated in the abduction of Leah Steinbecker, which was engineered by our dear sister Deborah! You were a steward who took treasonable action against a properly constituted deputy of your Administrator. You, David - a man who held a position of trust within the Secretariat - was reported as being a somewhat unwilling accomplice, but an accomplice, nevertheless! You, Gideon, have been implicated by statements made by your companions. Then, there is the unresolved suggestion that you were all implicated in the assassination of Marcus Steinbecker. Rebecca, your cousin, may well have been the one to plant the device which killed him, but you are implicated by consorting. The equation begins to come together."

There was another pause, Perga's head was still bowed. He looked up abruptly.

"Even if you are innocent as the driven snow, in the murder of Marcus Steinbecker, I would be qualified for certification if I allowed you a position of trust within my Administration. My decision is quite simple, I will give you two hours to clear the territory of my Administration! At the end of that time, I will extend the measures taken against you by ben Levi! If you are within my territory beyond that time, you will be arrested and detained. Do I make myself clear!? Now, get out of my sight!"

He moved his hand over a desk pad and the main doors slid open. A small posse of militia entered and stood silently with hands on the hilt of their swords. Gideon opened his mouth to say something, found the bloodshot eyes of the Administrator boring into his, shut his mouth, turned and stalked out of the room, followed by the equally mute trio who had accompanied him. They were led through the ring of men guarding the main entrance to the building and virtually dumped at the base of the steps. Kurt Weber was the first to break the silence. He said casually.

"I feel a little as if they have just put out the trash!"

Gideon ground out a response.

"You have an unfortunate choice of words."

David sat down on the steps and put his face in his hands. His legs refused to support him any further. Deborah looked down at him and then turned her eyes skywards.

"That was a quite brilliant fiasco, brother dear. What do we do now!"

Weber interjected.

"We get out of this Administration within the next one hour and fifty minutes, or we will find freedom of movement non-existent!"

Gideon answered slowly.

"I agree - we haven't got much time - in fact, too short a time to reach another Administration - with the exception of one!"

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They looked at each other, Deborah shook her head.

"You can't be serious, Gideon!"

"Why not! If Perga rejects us, it follows that the opposition might find us interesting! I suggest we find a Shuttle and put it to use whilst we have time."

Deborah persisted with her objection.

"I will not get mixed up in a war zone, Gideon. Kurt! Make him see sense!"

"She's right, Gideon. We'll be shot out of the sky!"

"Not if we head north across the Eastern Basin, with out transmitter blaring forth our good intentions towards our dear brother Malenski and pleading for acceptance as refugees - I understand our good brother Gog, is a soft touch when it comes to assisting the dispossessed!"

By the end of the first day, Sedova's main force was well established in depth along a ten kilometre front. Micah Perga had started to move his straggling line of troops from the western extremity of his domain, to try to stem the tide which threatened to overwhelm his coastal storage facilities. Malenski acted upon the certainty that he was sure to do so and under the cover of darkness, sent a convoy of Transporters and Shuttles to establish a large force in the recently abandoned areas. The net result was that Perga's reinforcements suddenly found themselves attacked from the rear and were obliged to defend themselves on two fronts.

By the end of the next day, Perga had suffered a cataclysmic defeat. His western army had been decimated by an enemy who had forgotten the meaning of mercy. Malenski's troops were pouring inland, into the rich and fertile plains which had once been desert land. Town after town fell to the invaders, their rich resources were plundered at will. They were stripped of everything and their populations were either dead or in flight. There was only one ray of light in the whole sorry mess and that was that the army protecting Egypt itself and more particularly the delta of the Nile, was still intact and prepared to counter attack against Sedova and the main force.

The appearance of strength was soon proved to be a delusion. Sedova had held back, he had been content to follow the strategy proposed by Malenski. He had to admit that it had worked better than might have been expected. He suspected that it was more to do with military ineptness on the part of Micah Perga and his captains, than some divine inspiration which had turned the bureaucrat Malenski into a military genius.

The plan had been to hold their thrust against Egypt until the rear areas were secured. The airborne force had spread far to the south and westerly, almost to the border of the mountains which separated the North African Administration from that which was controlled by Joshua Aristides. It had also been agreed that there would be no provocation against the Western European Administrator. Malenski's troops took up position well short of the border. They were content to allow Perga's demoralised forces to flee into Aristides's area and create for him a refugee problem of sizeable proportions.

Then, it was time to redeploy and make ready for the surge into the Nile delta. The immediate aim was Nile City. It was the focal point of Perga's Administration. If it was to fall, the heart would go out of the forces opposing them. Then, it would be time to look to their secondary objectives. For ten days, the two armies faced each other across the abandoned croplands

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along the coastal plain. To the south, was the Qattarah Depression. For Sedova's army, it formed a convenient flank and one which could be easily monitored. Echoing historical occasions, the battle would be conducted between the old coastline and the depression. The first objective would be New Alexandria - and then, not so far beyond, in terms of actual kilometres - Nile City.

Malenski arrived in an unescorted Pod and without aides, on the night before the battle was to be joined. Sedova had established his men in a straggle of camps along an ill-defined line which depicted the extent of his advance. In these matters, he was sloppy, he was over confident, so sure of himself that his battle seasoned troops could not be defeated, that he paid scant attention to occupying critical points, or ensuring commanding positions. Malenski's Pod had described a slow sweep along the line from the south, the weakness of deployment was obvious.

Sedova met his commander with ill disguised contempt. He had known that it would only be a matter of time before Malenski had finished with his supervision of ferrying men and supplies to the rear. In Sedova's estimation, it had been his seasoned troops who had crushed Perga's reinforcements from the west. Malenski had had the simple task of securing virtually undefended settlements and occupying vast tracks of cropland. Now, the great commander had arrived at a critical point in the proceedings and could be relied upon to interfere in the conduct of the coming battle.

"I thought you would be resting in the rear, Georgi."

It was two hours after his arrival, they were sitting in a circle of captains, in Sedova's tent. The comment was casual to the point of being contemptuous. The conversation fell away. Malenski stared at the floor and Sedova's mouth twisted into a sneer. He pushed his point.

"After all, you have been very busy, pushing orders and communiqués across the table - we all realise that after a hard day engaged in that sort of work, it can be very tiring!"

One of the Scandian captains snorted in laughter, his comrades joined him. Gubkin and the others remained silent. Malenski looked up.

"Where else would I be on the evening of the major battle of our campaign? Surely, you would expect Gog to be with his Horde!?"

He stared into his General's eyes. Sedova's sneer lost its humour, it became a grimace. The Scandian captains looked uncertain. Gubkin watched Malenski intently.

"Has Gog's general lost his tongue? Sedova has always been ready to open his mouth - sometimes too wide!"

The uncertainty in Sedova's eyes was replaced by something else. He slowly drew his knife and laid it on the ground in front of him. He was seated no more than two paces from Malenski. The others were more distant, they appeared paralysed by the rapid change of mood.

"Perhaps, tongues can wag a little to freely, Georgi - sometimes they have to be cut down to size!"

Malenski stared him in the eye, he made no move to draw his own knife. He shook his head slowly.

"You have never understood, have you Sedova? Your ambition has always driven you - and now it drives you to make threats you can't fulfil. I am Gog - and Gog will not be another of your victims. Gog has come to take command - Sedova's time is at an end!"

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Sedova eyed him steadily and then his mouth twisted into its usual sneer. He reached out and picked up the knife, it glinted in the light of the rush lamp. Gubkin stirred, Malenski held up his hand to check him.

"This is between Gog and Sedova!"

Sedova held out the knife at arm's length, which brought it with a few inches of Malenski's face. He didn't flinch back, neither did he draw his own weapon. Sedova jeered.

"What's the matter, little Georgi, have your guts gone to water? Draw your knife and I'll give you a fair fight."

"Do what you think you can do, Sedova - I repeat - your time is at an end!"

Sedova scrambled to his feet and towered over the seated man. Malenski looked up at him without blinking.

"Then, little Georgi, I'll butcher you like a sacrificial goat! You can plead for your life if you wish - I might give you that, but I'll take your tongue - and your eyes! Let your army see how the mighty Gog manages, stumbling around blind and mute!"

"Do what you think you can do!"

Sedova turned and grinned at the Scandians, they managed to twitch a response. He eyed Gubkin and the others in contempt. He turned back, supreme in his confidence, he bared his yellow teeth in the repulsive, familiar grimace. Malenski sat waiting for what would happen next. He stared into Sedova's eyes for a long moment. Sedova glowered back and then lifted the knife for a thrust downward. His arm reached the upmost position of the thrust and then something quite unfathomable took place. He faltered and his eyes suddenly were glazed in panic. Malenski looked at him steadfastly. Sedova had started to sweat and a red surge of blood suffused his neck and face. He tried to say something, but all he could manage was a gasp of escaped air. His free hand clutched at his throat and the one holding the knife lost its grip, it fell to the ground at his feet. He tottered for a moment and then fell like a great tree and hit the ground with a resounding thud. He stared into Malenski's eyes and in his, was a look of horror. They turned back into his head. He gasped again, twitched and then lay still.

Gubkin came to his senses before the Scandian captains. He drew his own knife and held it at the throat of one of them. The other Scandians were quickly secured in the same fashion. Malenski continued to stare at the fallen Sedova. The man's dead eyes stared blindly back at him.

"Gog was never destined to be subordinate to man's ambitions. Tonight, I have put it to the test. Now, you can make it known that Gog leads his people and that we will be victorious in the battle to come."

He turned to the captains.

"Sedova was never your general - if he had success, it was because you were led by Gog! It is to Gog that you owe allegiance, you owed Sedova no loyalty. It makes no difference whether you are Scandians or whether you followed me across Siberia. Gubkin, you can let our comrades go free! They have seen what happens to those who dare to try their hand against Gog. Let them go free, and let them spread the word of what they've seen here tonight. Spread the word - but remember, it will not matter whether it is one man or a hundred who come against me - I will prevail! Gog will prevail and those who think otherwise, will not live to crow of their success!"

Gubkin withdrew his knife from the throat of the Scandian. The man

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sank to his knees and sobbed for breath. It had nothing to do with the way he had been held. It was sheer, mortal terror. The rest were in much the same condition, to a greater or lesser degree. They crept away from the tent without a word and Gog was left alone with the corpse of Pik Sedova. Malenski's shoulders started to heave and he sobbed silently. After a while, he rose and stumbled from the tent and made his way through the camp. Men at their fires turned their eyes away when he passed and muttered in superstitious fear.

Micah Perga could know nothing of the drama which had taken place a few hundred kilometres to the west. In his Administration headquarters on the Nile, he faced his own problems. During the previous fourteen days, the news had been all bad. The western provinces of his administration had fallen to the invaders. The rich storages along the coast and far inland, in the vast plains of the Saharan wheatlands, had fallen with ridiculous ease to Malenski and his airborne militia. There had continued a steady infiltration to the south and soon, the border between his and the Central African Administration, would be reached. There had been no offers of help from that quarter - or from any other.

His agents told him, that in the west, Joshua Aristides was fighting a stiff rearguard battle against hordes of Scandians who had almost reached the Pyrenees. Joshua's northern provinces were lost, and he had suffered major casualties. Perga knew he could expect no repetition of the assistance which had been forthcoming on the previous occasion. The Central African Administration was in open revolt and might even prove to be a threat rather than an ally. It was a matter of gloomy certainty, that if Malenski chose to cross into their territory, it would be a walkover. There was only one other direction from which he might expect help, but there was not even a gesture of aid from Michael ben Levi.

Micah Perga sat in the darkness in his big office. He was alone. He wasn't even sure if his aides waited in the outer rooms. The building seemed ominously quiet. He looked out at the lights of the great city, which had been built on the banks of the Nile, eight hundred years earlier. It had replaced Old Cairo and it also covered the foundations of the fabled Pyramids, which had survived for thousands of years before the lunacy of the nuclear start of the Great Destruction. The city was quiet too - it was as if everything was holding its breath, waiting for the next episode in the inevitable sequence of events, to unfold.

The latest communiqués had been in the same vein as those which had flowed across his desk earlier. The invaders were building their strength, consolidating their position, winding up the tension on the spring which would be released when they made their thrust to the Nile. It mattered very little where they chose to initiate the attack. His remaining forces were evenly stretched out between the sea and Qattarah. There was always a possibility that they might try a flanking movement to the south, trying to bypass his line of defence, but he had catered for that move also. It was a question of waiting and holding his nerve.

The thought struck him like an appalling shock. Waiting! Waiting for what? Waiting to be overwhelmed by forces which had forgotten the meaning of the word mercy. Waiting to be butchered as they tried to defend what little was left. Waiting for inevitable defeat and even if one or the other survived, to be ground down in the dust under the heel of the conqueror. He rose to his

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feet slowly and considered his options. Someone had once described him as a pragmatist - he believed it was a generalised opinion. He asked himself the question. If he was a pragmatist, what was to be gained by displaying false heroics and dying on the field of battle? Would it not be better to run away and perhaps, to fight another day? Better a live coward than a dead hero! He sat down again slowly, and in the darkness carefully considered his next move.

The news of the invasion of the North African Administration and the explanation for the depletion of the forces threatening his southern flank, was relayed to Alexander Barenkov by one of his few remaining agents in southern Greece. The great armada had sailed and taken with it, Sedova and the cream of his army. Malenski had followed, this time airborne. All that was left were a few garrisons who were supposed to hold the critical areas gained during the previous weeks. It was a situation waiting for him to take advantage. He was quick to make contact with his cousin Feodor. They met in a small town on the border of their stewardships, at the mouth of the Danube. Feodor had been the first to arrive, he rose to his feet when Alexander burst into the room. They hugged each other in a welcoming embrace. Alexander drew back and looked into Feodor's eyes.

"I heard about Elena's death - I'm sorry."

It was the first time that there had been an open acknowledgement of the aborted relationship between Feodor and the wife of Georgi Malenski. Feodor turned away and shrugged.

"I should have insisted that she stayed with me - but she thought otherwise. I would have taken better care of her - but this is old history. You say you have something interesting to tell me."

Alexander nodded.

"We have the opportunity to regain some ground - perhaps a lot of ground! Malenski has committed the cardinal error of leaving his garrisons undermanned, whilst he is off on this new adventure in North Africa. We can roll back the tide! You can strike north and east, I can strike south and west. We'll push Malenski's farmers back to where they started, together with the so-called militia he has left to guard them. It might give him a bad taste in the mouth, especially if Micah Perga gives him a thrashing in Egypt!"

42.

Michael and Leah watched events unfolding from the security of Jerusalem. It could not be denied that Gog was drawing near. Already, there was an uneasiness under the surface of apparent calm. This was particularly evident in the southern areas along the border with the North African Administration. In fact, there was a steady flow of refugees coming across that border; those who had decided to get out of the way of the advancing Horde. Michael did nothing to prevent their entry, most of them were in transit, heading north and east into the less populated, but still fertile lands of Arabia and Mesopotamia. Some remained in Jerusalem, a few were known to the officials of the Administration. Michael carefully negotiated an invitation to

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dinner, at his home in the Judaeen hills. The objective was to pump them for information. Achor Zerah was one of them.

Nothing much was discussed during the early courses of the meal. Michael kept the conversation on neutral terms. Apart from Luke and another of his advisors, he and Leah entertained Zerah and another, even smaller man with a propensity to frequently mop his forehead. Michael decided early, that it had been a mistake to invite him. The nervous mopping indicated a condition of near panic, the man was clearly overwhelmed to find himself without the security of a lifetime and could hardly provide a coherent response when he was asked to pass the salt. Michael concentrated on Achor Zerah. All that was known about him, was that he was a minor official at the Nile City Administrative Headquarters.

"More wine, brother Zerah?"

The little man looked a little overawed to be receiving so much attention from no less a person than Michael ben Levi.

"Most kind, Administrator."

Michael topped up his glass.

"You are most welcome to our hospitality - for your, no doubt, short visit to our city."

"Short?"

"I assumed it to be a short visit - in view of the situation in your homeland."

Zerah eyed him nervously. Michael added smoothly.

"Of course, you are more than welcome to stay as long as you wish - after all, you are a valued assistant of a fellow Administrator."

"Most kind, Administrator!"

"And how is my dear friend, Micah?"

Luke looked at the ceiling and studied the ornamentation of eight hundred years as if he had never seen it before. Zerah coughed.

"As you can imagine, brother ben Levi - extremely preoccupied with the invasion of his Administration."

"But of course! I am very grieved that the situation seems to have grown to the grave proportions it has. I wonder - did brother Micah offer some sort of compromise to brother Malenski - an offer of provisions - or to open the storages, perhaps?"

"I'm not aware of any such contact, brother ben Levi."

Michael nodded slowly.

"It might have turned away the assault on your homeland. I'm sure we all remember the saying: 'A soft answer turns away anger.'"

Zerah flushed slightly, the wine was loosening his tongue and making him a little braver.

"The fiendish Sedova has only wrath in his heart, brother ben Levi. It is my opinion that his main objective has not been to secure provisions - it is nothing less than conquest!"

Michael nodded.

"And what about the real leader of the army, brother Malenski - are his thoughts only of conquest?"

Zerah focused with difficulty.

"We've certainly heard nothing from Malenski - he's in the west, securing the rear. Now, there, brother ben Levi, was a classic example of Micah Perga's miscalculation!"

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"Miscalculation?"

"Micah pulled our troops out to try to stop the seaborne landing near to the delta. Malenski came in behind him - and between the two forces, we lost thirty thousand men! It must be said - another Perga blunder!"

Michael topped up his informant's glass. Zerah smiled in gratitude.

"I suppose that would be a general opinion, brother Zerah? Tell me, have there been many such miscalculations?"

"Daily! Take your four emissaries - the ones you sent with the verbal communiqué. He sent them packing! Told them to take their message some place else! Told them, they would lose all privileges if they weren't out of his Administration within two hours."

Michael, Luke and Leah exchanged glances.

"I had wondered what had become of them, brother Zerah! Tell me, where did they go?"

Zerah giggled.

"North! Would you believe it? North! Right into the arms of Gog. Their Shuttle communicator was screaming undying love and friendship and that they were refugees! I could have told Perga they were spies, he should have held them. No! He let them go - only goes to show, the man's lost his edge. The Nile will be overrun and the whole of Egypt will fall to Gog the conqueror!"

Michael ventured one last question.

"Where is Micah now, brother Zerah."

Zerah looked cautiously around and held a finger to his lips.

"That is a good question, brother ben Levi! Where is Micah Perga - he's somewhere, but where? For two days before we left, he wasn't to be found. We thought he had joined the battle, but no one has seen him. Our army is still trying to hold back Gog and his men from New Alexandria, but they're losing ground. Everyone wants to talk to Micah, they want him to tell them what to do - but where is he!?"

Zerah had slurred away to nothing, his head drooped on his chest. He muttered a few more words but they were incoherent. Michael gestured to two of the house servants and they carried him away. His smaller companion managed to follow, stiff legged. Michael looked at his remaining guests.

"That confirms the latest reports. Micah Perga has disappeared."

"Perhaps he was kidnapped by Gideon and his crowd and they've taken him to Gog!"

"An intriguing scenario, Luke, but it doesn't hold water. Micah was still around after he sent our four criminals on their way - no there's some other explanation."

"Political enemies in Egypt, perhaps. Micah was never a very popular Administrator, even during the Time of Peace."

"That's a possibility, Leah - but there could be one other very simple explanation - Micah might have got out whilst the going was good! He can read scriptures as well as us and on occasions, I've been known to tell him to take them seriously. He must have realised that Egypt will eventually fall to the invaders. He knew his time was at an end and perhaps, decided that it was futile to resist and try to stem the tide. He may simply have looked for some secure place to hide!"

Luke snorted in derision.

"It doesn't seem to hold with the image he's always tried to wave like a

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flag - the ruthless dictator, who has everything and everyone under his thumb."

Michael nodded.

"Remember, Luke, we live in the time when we are all to be revealed for what we are - even to ourselves!"

"He's left his army leaderless!"

"True, Leah, he was the overall commander, his captains will try to do their best, but they will be picked off, one after the other by Malenski and his General."

Luke looked at the ceiling again.

"Or by Malenski alone, perhaps."

Michael waited.

"Do I have to extract it out of you?"

Luke came down to earth.

"There are unconfirmed reports that something strange has happened in the Malenski camp. At first, I didn't take much notice, we have such reports all the time, but this is persistent. I didn't have the chance to talk to you before our guests arrived."

"WHAT reports, Luke!?"

"There is a persistent report that Sedova isn't with the main force moving into Egypt. He hasn't been seen for several days. It's a significant change in the pattern. Sedova has always been in the thick of the action - this time, Malenski himself seems to be giving the orders."

"That doesn't mean much - except that we had better be on the watch for a main thrust somewhere else. Malenski has obviously sent him off to give someone a nasty surprise when they least expect it."

Luke nodded and rocked on the back legs of his chair. Michael eyed the action with disfavour, the chair was over six hundred years old.

"You might be right, Michael - there are other rumours - not much more than whispers - but they've come from a number of sources. They say that Sedova is dead!"

Michael leaned forward, the shock in his voice was obvious.

"Dead!?"

"That's not all - Even more wild, is the suggestion that he was killed by Georgi Malenski!"

Some time later, when the rest of the household had gone to their beds, Leah and Michael watched the moon setting over the western ridge of hills which hid the villa from Jerusalem. It was almost full and the sky was clear. The chill of the coming winter was already causing the trees to drop their leaves. The bare branches were silhouetted against the silver light, like gnarled fingers reaching for the stars. Leah sighed from the muffled comfort of the blanket they were sharing.

"It's very beautiful - so still and peaceful. I find myself trying to capture every moment of peace we can still enjoy. I don't want to let go of even one second. We took it so much for granted for a thousand years and didn't realise what a precious gift we were given. Perhaps we even squandered it away without thought! Now, most of it has gone, only moments like this remain - and soon, they will be gone too!"

Michael was quiet for a moment. He held her close within the cover. He murmured.

"Have I ever told you how very much I love you, my darling?"

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"Not much - lately!"

"I know! I deserve that - everyone demands more and more of my time and you're the one who has to give it. I promise you it will be different from now on."

She held her finger to his lips.

"Don't make promises you can't keep - if it is different, it will be because you have to give more time, not less!"

He kissed her on the mouth. She felt his heart thudding through the thin cloth of his shirt.

"Michael, we must make the best use of the time we still have - How long, do you think, before Georgi reaches Nile City?"

He hesitated for a moment.

"Only a matter of days, I suppose. The rumours Luke mentioned have introduced another factor in the equation."

"You can't take them seriously, surely!? I couldn't imagine Georgi killing Pik Sedova. I haven't met the man, but from what you told me, he's built like a bear and is about as strong. He would snap Georgi in half like a twig!"

"I know it sounds improbable - but we're not talking about Georgi anymore - now, we are dealing with Gog! Where Gog is concerned, the improbable becomes very possible!"

"What if it is true - will Sedova not being there make much difference?"

"Georgi's army was built around Sedova, around his personality as much as anything else. He recruited them, he trained them and he welded a fighting force which has swept everyone from their path. Much is going to depend on the hold Gog has over his army. I agree, that in the long term, it will be absolute - in the short term, he might find it difficult to make them toe the line and press the assault against New Alexandria and Nile City. One thing is for sure, he won't be committing any troops against us until he's consolidated his ground in Egypt."

Leah shivered and he held her closer.

"Cold?"

She shook her head.

"I was thinking of the peaceful villages and towns along the border, from Gaza, right across the Negev and into Sinai. Are they your unwalled cities and towns, with a people living in peace?"

"Just as much as the unwalled cities and towns and their citizens, in Siberia, Russia, the Barenkov stewardships, in Libya and Egypt. Gog and his Horde have rolled over them all like a plague - and the Holiest of all Lands will not escape. It has to come, my darling!"

She whispered.

"Do you remember the words of the Lord, spoken not so very far from this place? Someone asked him what the last days would be like."

"Can you remember them?"

"I think so, it is in Matthew 24. It went something like this:

'So when you see "the abomination of desolation", of which the prophet Daniel spoke, standing in the holy place (let the reader understand), then those who are in Judaea must take to the hills. If a man is on the roof, he must not come down to fetch his goods from the house; if in the field, he must not turn back for his coat. Alas for the woman with child in those days,

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and for those who have children at the breast! Pray that it may not be in winter when you have to make your escape. It will be a time of great distress; there has never been such a time from the beginning of the world until now, and will never be again. If that time of troubles were not cut short, no living thing would survive; but for the sake of God's chosen, it will be cut short."

Michael murmured.

"Almost word for word, I would guess - you have a remarkable memory for those texts! - Yes, it will be a time of trouble such as we have never seen before, but we have to cling to the promise that the time of troubles will be cut short - and we will survive!"

"The abomination spoken of by Daniel has already been set up in the holy place - "

"Don't remind me, Leah! I count it as one of my greatest failures not to have prevented it!"

"You couldn't have stopped it! You're always telling us that the scriptures have to be fulfilled - apply that word to yourself!"

"Yes, Ma'am!"

"The Lord Himself, indicated the time period - He gave us a pointer - we have had our warning!"

"What's your point?"

"Take up the rest of it! When the invasion starts, don't try to resist - the population must flee into the mountains with no delay, no one must try to salvage their goods, or even their clothing. The way to reduce casualties is to remove the people from the path of the invaders!"

Michael shook his head in the near darkness.

"I doubt if we'll have much success with some of our mountain men, they're red blooded hotheads. From the reports coming in, most of our border brethren are spoiling for a fight!"

Leah pulled away from him.

"Then, you must convince them that this is NOT the time to fight - you will need them all when it comes to Armageddon! You said yourself, it will more than likely be no more than a probing raid."

"The rest of the prophesy in Daniel, seems to indicate something happening to relieve the pressure on us."

"How does it go, Michael?"

"It follows after the king of the north overrunning Egypt and then thrusting up into Moab, Edom and Ammon - something happens, let me see if I can remember, I think it goes something like this:

'Then rumours from the east and north will alarm him, and he will depart in a great rage to destroy and exterminate many.'"

"He will invade us by way of Moab, Edom and Ammon?"

"The implication in Daniel is that he will launch one attack through the mountains of Moab, on the far side of the Salt Sea - that doesn't mean to say that he won't also attack along the coast through Gaza. Daniel says: 'Yet all these lands, including Edom and Moab and the remnant of the Ammonites, will survive his attack.'"

She whispered.

"That country is so beautiful - fertile, rolling hills, it's more like a garden

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than cropland. I don't want to see it when it has been devastated! Is there no way to stop it!"

"You were the one who said we should evacuate our population to the hills and make no resistance!"

She was quiet in his arms. Then she asked in a very small voice.

"Will we have to evacuate this place - or even Jerusalem?"

He took a long time to answer.

"This place, possibly - Jerusalem - never! We will stay in the Camp of the Saints until Gog comes to Esdraelon."

"Because, that is where Michael must be to join the battle!"

He looked at her, there was a sharp edge of bitterness in her voice.

"You have always known that, Leah!"

"Michael, When you asked me to be your wife, I told you that I thought it might not be such a good idea because one day, I might love you so much that I might try to turn you aside from what you are destined to do. I told you that I might be a clinging wife, who would want you to be with her instead. Do you remember that?"

"Yes, I remember - what are you trying to tell me."

"I'm trying to tell you that I'm about to become a silly, clinging woman, who doesn't want you to ride off into battle and perhaps die! I want you near to me, because I am frightened and because I take the words of warning that the Lord Jesus gave very seriously. He told us to pray that a woman is not with child in this time, or that she should not have a child at the breast. Well, my darling Michael, I am with child! I want my husband to be near me - I don't want to be alone like Elena, waiting for a man who doesn't come and perhaps, dying with words of love for him on her lips!"

For a moment, Michael sat rigid in a paralysis of shock and then he held her against him and kissed her over and over again. She cried softly and let him caress her, and stroked his dark, curling hair, and inwardly pleaded for the peace and the beauty to remain; but like the disappearing moon, she knew it would not last and that darkness would overwhelm them in a very short time.

The flood of refugees from the south increased during the next few days. Communications with the Egypt were virtually non-existent, therefore, the refugees were the only source of information. New Alexandria had fallen very quickly under the hammer blows of Gog's cavalry. It was the first intimation that he now had a mounted army. It jolted Michael's remembrance of the prophesy, Daniel had said that: 'the king of the north will come storming against him with chariots and cavalry and many ships'. The chariots were easy to define, Pods and Shuttles - but Malenski had also shipped horses from the conquered lands along the Danube. It was an area which historically, had provided for the armies of other conquerors.

Each successive day brought worse news. It was confirmed that Micah Perga was nowhere to be found. The news had created the paralysis predicted by Michael. The army of the absentee 'king of the south' fell apart. There was no cohesion of defence. The captains tried to hold things together, but they had never learned to cooperate and during Perga's time, they had never been called upon to exercise any initiative. It was only a matter of time before Malenski found a chink in the armour, through which he poured his Scandian troops. They surged on to the Nile and encompassed the chief city of the Administration.

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The bureaucrats who were trying to administer a war by committee, in the absence of a central leader, came to a rapid committee decision to surrender the city without even a token defence - and so, Nile City fell to the invading, ruthless men who were not to be denied their opportunity to rape and pillage. It had been promised to them as the ultimate goal and Malenski was either unable, or unwilling to try to hold them back.

The following days were taken up with securing the storages in the Nile delta. Malenski diverted some of the main force to pursue those still inclined to fight, along the Nile valley southward. The rich storages around the Saharan perimeter fell into his hands and by the end of another ten days, the riches of Egypt and Libya were in his hands and he could turn his eyes towards the plunder to be gained across the low hills bordering the trough of the old canal which had once connected the Mediterranean to the Red Sea. Like Moses, he looked across to the Promised Land, but he led no Exodus of slaves and he asked for no miracle to part the waters.

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Gog appeared to hesitate to cross the undefined border into the heart of the Central Administration Area. He held back the forces who were poised to do so. His captains murmured between themselves but lacked the courage to question the commands of the grim faced man, who had shown that his look could destroy. They had little else to complain about, Malenski had applied his undoubted administrative talents and ensured that each corp. of his sprawling army was furnished with the support they required to press home their objectives.

His commanders, far distant in the south, pressing down the Nile, or converging on to the borders of the Central African Administration, were given their heads. Only when it became a matter of cohesion and ensuring that one corp. did not outstrip another, did he intervene. When he was obliged to do so, his reasons were fully explained - and more importantly, accept.

He had kept his most loyal - together with his least trustworthy captains - closest to him. Gubkin became his aide-de-camp and, together with the captains about whom he was sure, was given the task of watching the cowed Scandians, who had witnessed the unbelievable destruction of Pik Sedova. Malenski was under no illusions that they would be cowed for long. The Scandians were ruthless men, who would soon find a rational reason for what had happened; this would replace the superstitious fear which was now their driving force.

Malenski had installed himself in the great mansion which had housed Micah Perga's headquarters. He even used the defeated Administrator's office. He instituted a nightly briefing with those of his captains who were not in the field. It took place in luxurious surroundings. It was a deliberate ploy, specifically to rub home to the Scandians, the degree of his success without the benefit of Pik Sedova's leadership, and to keep the uncultured wild men

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of the north, off balance.

They had met as usual, at the end of another day. As usual, they were provided with a review of the progress of each of the corps. It took the form of a series of reports delivered by one of the Micah Perga's civil administrators, who had had the sagacity to change sides and offer his services to a new master. Malenski didn't particularly like him and certainly distrusted him - but he served a purpose. Joseph Assad rounded off a well constructed report.

"So, you will see brothers, that the third corp. is progressing rapidly southward along the Nile Valley and is now in the vicinity of the Great Irrigation Lake. The latest report indicates that the pumping stations have been secured without damage or disruption. The fourth corp. is now investing the Tibetsi Ranges and has encountered the anticipated pocket of resistance in that area. The latest update indicates adequate resources to flush out the defenders within the indicated time frame. Elements of both corps are in mutual contact and are in no danger of being outflanked. The border with the Aristides Administrative Area is secure and there has been no evidence of potential intervention."

The man drew happily to a close and even managed a timid smile in the face of the implacable, steady, unsmiling gaze of Georgi Malenski. It wavered away into a nervous swallow. Malenski stirred.

"Thank you, brother Assad - you are now excused."

They waited as he hastily retreated and the door panel closed after him. One of the Scandian captains stirred restlessly.

"He had no report of the first and second corps!"

Malenski glanced at him.

"I think we do not have to waste our time listening to reports of what we well know. The first corp. has secured Nile City and New Alexandria and the Delta. The second Corp. has occupied the area between the Nile and the Central Administration Border."

The same captain pursued the point.

"And is doing nothing but sitting on their hands - it's worth remembering that idle men become restless men - there's rich pickings over the border."

"We have pickings enough - we're not here to rape and pillage for the sake of it!"

The man looked down from the steady gaze. It was the first indication Malenski had given that he had no sympathy with what had happened in New Alexandria and Nile City. His reply was a defensive mutter.

"The men were promised their pickings."

Malenski nodded.

"Sedova promised it - and we all know that Sedova thought he was in command. There will be no more promises and bribes!"

The captain was stung into one last shot.

"Then, you will lose the men you have! They don't fight for no reward!"

Malenski's response was mild.

"If there is any dissatisfaction - even amongst the captains - they can open their mouths and they can go back from whence they came - I want no malcontents - I don't need them. Our army is swelling with those willing to follow - Libyans, Egyptians, Ethiopians. Other reports tell me, even the Persians are deserting Michael ben Levi and welcoming our farmers crossing the Hindu Kush."

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Gubkin intervened for the first time.

"So, you believe that the words of prophesy are being fulfilled, brother Georgi?"

Malenski shifted his eyes to him.

"The words of prophesy will always be fulfilled, brother Nicholai - what specifically do you mean?"

"Why! Where it says: 'Libyans and Cushites will follow in his train', and again: 'He will overrun land after land, sweeping over them like a flood - .'"

Malenski said softly.

"Go on, what comes next?"

Gubkin swallowed.

"Amongst them the fairest of all lands, and tens of thousands will fall victims. Yet all these lands including Edom and Moab and the remnant of the Ammonites, will survive his attack."

The silence was charged. Malenski continued softly.

"It seems you have a point to make, Nicholai."

"My point is this - You have always insisted that the words of prophesy are to be fulfilled. If we follow one, then we must follow them all - on that basis, we must cross into the Central Administration!"

The silence was longer this time. Malenski's face was immobile then he closed his eyes and sighed. He dismissed the other captains.

"... But, you remain, Gubkin."

The room emptied and then he opened his eyes. Gubkin sat opposite him, wary and poised for further battle. Malenski stared at him without smiling.

"You have something more on your mind, I think."

Gubkin nodded.

"I will speak freely - "

"A brave man, considering what happened to the mighty Sedova!"

"What happened to the mighty Sedova would have happened anyway! He led the lifestyle of a lecher and indulged in unimaginable orgies. He went into towering rages when the veins on his neck would bulge to the point of rupture - it was only a matter of time before he was felled with a stroke!"

Malenski's face eased into a slight smile.

"So, the fearsome monster Gog has not proved his ability to kill his opposition in a single look? Is that what you are telling yourself - or is it what you really believe?"

"What I believe, or what I do not believe, is not of much consequence. You can dispose of me or anyone else with a nod of your head - so, one way or the other, you take care of your 'opposition'."

Malenski asked gently.

"Do you count yourself as opposition, Nicholai?"

"I oppose assumptions, brother Malenski! I want to ask you a question."

"Go ahead."

"You talk of being driven to what you must do by the words of scripture. You follow a course of action dictated by the words of Daniel the prophet. You say you are compelled to follow these 'directions' because it is inevitable. You tell us that you have 'hooks in your jaws' by which God is forcing you to follow a course of action dictated by His will. Yet, in another breath, you deny our God and say you worship only the god of the citadel

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and fortress - the god of conquest - "

"You haven't yet asked your question, Gubkin - you have made a series of statements!"

Gubkin stared at him without wavering.

"Can you answer me this: Which way round is it? Are you incapable of exercising your own will because the words of prophesy are compelling you - OR - or are you following your own course and trying to fit the words of prophesy to agree with your actions!?"

There was a long silence.

"An interesting alternative, Nicholai - a question I have often asked myself. I can't answer you - anymore, I suspect, than a similar question can be answered. Was Judas a free agent when he betrayed Jesus, or was he predestined to do so? - after all, there is a prophesy about that too! Many learned men since the time of the First Apostles have troubled themselves with trying to reconcile the doctrine of free will, with that of an omnipotent God who has predestined our course - some decided one way and others took the opposing view. We must add your question to the general debate. Is Gog obligated to be Gog because he is predestined to be the monster from the north - or does he have a free will - and as you suggest - tries to force the prophesy to agree with what he does!?"

"I must tell you, Georgi Malenski, that I do not hold much faith in ancient prophesies. I have followed you so far, because the Georgi Malenski I knew at the mouth of the Lena, was a dedicated man, a loving man, who cared for his stewardship and was loved by those who benefited from his efforts. That Georgi Malenski led us out of certain death and fought to keep us alive, since then, he has provided food for millions.

I do not follow a man who is forcing himself to believe he is Gog! Gog will lead us to Armageddon - that is, if we take notice of what is written. You are trying to convince yourself that you are Gog and you believe you can do nothing to change your destiny - If you want my advice - you will try! Break the chain of events that you think you are following - do something which is not prophesied! Prove to yourself that you are a free agent!"

Once again, there was a protracted silence. The two men sat opposite each other across the desk. Malenski's eyes were closed.

"I hear what you saying, Nicholai - I will give it some thought - You might be right. In the meantime - as our Scandian comrades have said - we must not sit on our hands. Prepare the second corp. to sail in two days - we will enter into the 'Fairest of all Lands' via the Port of Elat. Our thrust will take us to the east of the Salt Sea. I am entrusting the attack to you, I'm quite sure you have already laid your plans. For the time being, we will avoid an encounter along the coastal strip - that may come later. I don't have to remind you that Michael ben Levi DOES read his prophesies, therefore, you can expect a tough resistance. He will not roll over and play dead like Micah Perga!"

Gubkin wore a look of defeat, Malenski had listened to what he had had to say, but it had apparently made no impression. The man who had convinced himself that he was Gog, was determined to follow to the letter, the recipe for disaster contained in the ancient writings of a long dead prophet of Israel. When Gubkin returned to his quarters, he was almost in despair, after some thought, he despatched a communiqué to Gorki, there was only one man who might still persuade Georgi Malenski to abandon his suicidal

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course.

Two days later, the second corp. had already sailed to effect its landing at the head of the Gulf of Aqaba. Gubkin could not shake of an uneasy feeling about the whole exercise. There had been no attempt to disguise the fact that an invasion was about to take place. It was almost as if Malenski was signalling his intentions to the defenders. They would be well prepared to repel the landing.

The transporters were already well into the gulf, when Ruri Karpov presented himself at the Nile City Secretariat. Malenski greeted his senior advisor with surprise.

"I wasn't expecting you, Ruri - "

"I thought it advisable not to send a communiqué about my movements, Georgi. I had to cross a lot of hostile territory to reach you."

Malenski looked up sharply.

"I thought we had stabilised Suskov's territory - or has something happened to cause a disturbance?"

Ruri nodded.

"The winter has happened, Georgi. Within the last week, the temperatures have plummeted, we are getting another flood of refugees from beyond the Urals. Many who settled there have uprooted for a second time and are flooding to the west into Europe. They are stretching our resources to the limit. Compounding the problem, the Scandians to the north are on the move again and causing our militia a great deal of trouble. I haven't enough men to meet all the pressure being put upon us. I can't train new recruits quickly enough - in any case, you have the cream of our young men here with you."

Malenski eyed him without blinking.

"There's something else - "

Ruri nodded.

"Chernienko is forcing our people off the land to the south, he's trying to roll back our settlements over the old border of his stewardship and beyond, into Suskov territory. Much the same thing is happening in Anatole Barenkov's stewardship - Feodor is attacking the militia posts, neutralising them and then evicting our farmers! I can't juggle my resources to meet all the threats! - I didn't want to trust this to a communiqué."

Malenski nodded.

"You're right, of course! I will send you five thousand militia from the rearguard in Greece. You must spread them as you see fit. If possible, give Feodor Chernienko a short sharp lesson which he will not forget!"

His visitor looked relieved.

"Thank you, Georgi - it will be a great help. You've been listening to my tale of woe - and I haven't offered by condolences to you - Those who knew you from the beginning, knew how much you cared for Elena?"

Malenski turned to the window.

"As you are well aware, at the time of her death, Elena was no longer my wife! It was her decision to make her life elsewhere with our son. I mourn her loss - and that of the child she tried to bring into this world - but our life together was a mirage, a dream from another time. I have learned to move on!"

Ruri eyed the rigid back of the man who had once been like a brother and was now a stranger. He asked softly.

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"Before I return, will I have the chance to see Piotr?"

Malenski turned.

"He isn't with me - I left him with his mother, he is in good hands."

Ruri couldn't help his mouth gaping in surprise.

"In Jerusalem! Georgi, is that well advised? The boy could become a hostage!"

"I said he was in good hands. Michael ben Levi will not treat him as a hostage! On the other hand, what place has the boy with me? All he will hear are tales of Gog, of war, of conquest, of pillage and of rape! That is not the place for my son!"

"Then, Georgi, bring him home! You've done enough! Let others feed our millions. Come back to Gorki and take command of the situation there - it's your home!"

Malenski eyed him steadily.

"Gog has no home - except the far recesses of the north - and from there, he has already been led out. Gog has to follow the course laid out for him. He has no other option. That course does not include him taking his son back to an empty shell of a house, whose mother is dead, together with the love which once existed there!"

Within the hour, Ruri was on his way back to Gorki. His mission had failed, but he had had no opportunity to report its failure to the man who had initiated it. Gubkin was sailing further into the narrow cleft of sea between Sinai and Arabia. On either side, the watchers in the hills counted the flotilla of ships which carried his men and estimated the numbers who would make their landing and bring war to the land of Esau, ancient Edom. The word was relayed to Michael ben Levi in Jerusalem and the order was sent out: Let no man delay, leave your homes and your possessions, flee into the hills and from there, worry the flanks of the enemy, give them no rest, by day or by night. Wear them down, sap their energy, erode their confidence.

It was also on this day, that Feodor Chernienko and his cousin Alexander Barenkov, counter attacked the depleted garrisons Malenski had left in the forward positions in the Balkan Mountains. A strong force of the mounted Cossacks, Feodor had drilled and trained, surge into the valleys between the hills, slashing and carving their way through the ranks of men who had been used to easy victories. Within three days, they had cleared the way to the south, to the old coast above the Aegean polders where some craggy outposts, which had once been islands, still held out against Malenski's forces. Within another two days, they had turned to the west and were recovering the lands along the coast of Salonika and the adjacent polders. Thus it was, that the reinforcements promised by Georgi Malenski to Ruri Karpov, failed to materialise. They were fighting for their lives against the determined charges of men who had nothing more to lose.

Much the same thing happened further north. Alexander fought his way through the narrow gorge of the Iron Gates and surged through into the plain of the Danube. Resistance was light and forward groups of his cavalry were soon threatening the main Alpine camp from which Sedova had launched his attack. The Balkan peninsular was in chaos and in a great arc round into southern Russia, the counterattack put pressure on the sorely taxed forces of the invader from beyond the Urals. Compounding the problems for Ruri Karpov, was the relentless pressure from the north, in the form of the new Scandian bands, who, if anything, were more ferocious than

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those whom Sedova had faced in the first encounters.

Gubkin pressed doggedly forward, the nightly attacks on his camps were well organised and inflicted heavy losses. The morale and stamina of his men were undermined by lack of sleep and thin rations. By day, the flanks and rear were constantly under attack from groups who materialised from the undergrowth, inflicted their wounds and then withdrew before resistance could be organised. Gubkin resorted to sending out patrols. They had limited success, capturing one here and there, but then, they in turn were decimated by a counter attack. In that way, he lost a lot of men.

In the course of ten days, they had managed to penetrate within sight of the Salt Sea. The mountains of Moab and Ammon, were even more difficult terrain than those of Edom. Gubkin knew he stood on holy ground. He looked out across the dazzling, white expanse of the Salt Sea and watched the commerce of the Central Administration taking place, in the form of the transporters and shuttles which plied to and from the Terminal. Michael ben Levi was ensuring that it was business as usual, ignoring the invasion force which stood poised on the doorstep of Jerusalem.

Gubkin's pulse quickened, he was so close. If he was to divert his men to cross the expanse of the Salt Sea - perhaps, no more than forty kilometres - they would be on the threshold of the ultimate victory. It was surely what Georgi Malenski wanted - Gubkin remembered the conversation he had had with him: 'Break the chain of events that you think you are following - do something which is not prophesied! Prove to yourself that you are a free agent!'

If he was to take Jerusalem, it would break the prophesied chain of events - it would be something which was not prophesied - It would prove that Georgi Malenski was not Gog! - Then, perhaps, they could all go home and settle down to the comfortable life which was now no more than a distant memory!

Somewhere on this mountain range, Moses had once stood and looked over into the Promised Land. It must have been with considerable longing, for he already knew that he was not to be permitted to enter. Gubkin's train of thought was disturbed by yet another outcry from the men he had brought so far. They were under attack once more, Gubkin swore aloud, there would be more casualties. His men were more battle weary than if they had fought a hard battle. The constant raids had worn them down. He looked again at the tempting prize - it would be suicide. They would be picked off as they crossed the expanse of open salt. He made the decision to press forward to the north, following the eastern shore of the salt pan. If Jerusalem was to be taken, it would be by rounding the head of the ancient sea and by a frontal attack through the Judaeian hills.

44.

'Then rumours from the east and north will alarm him, and he will

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depart in a great rage to destroy and exterminate many.'"

Malenski closed down the computer outlet, swivelled around his chair and glared out into the bright sunlight which bounced off the white walls of the surrounding buildings. It was yet another confirmation - yet another indication that people like Ruri Karpov and Nicholai Gubkin, were no more than wishful thinkers, who wanted to turn aside the course of events which surely had to take place. The prophesies WOULD be fulfilled! In his own mind, he no longer entertained the thought that he could be any other than Gog. He would meet his end on the Plain of Esdraelon - but not now, despite the latest reports from Gubkin.

The invading force was very close to Jerusalem, close enough to make a charge in force through the Judaeen Hills and confront Michael ben Levi in his lair - but that was not how it was destined to be. Malenski rocked back and forth in his chair and saw nothing of the scenery outside the window. He saw a garden and a new grave and a small boy whose hand he placed into that of another man. Piotr was in Jerusalem, or more correctly, in the house in the Judaeen Hills, directly in the path of Gubkin's army. That is, if they were allowed to make their attack on Jerusalem - but that was not how it was to be. The books of prophesy said otherwise. Daniel and Ezekiel and Revelation all pointed to Esdraelon, the valley which lay beyond Jerusalem, between it and the coast. He remembered the continuation of the text he had read:

'He will pitch his royal pavilion between the sea and the holy hill, the fairest of all hills; and he will meet his end with no one to help him.'

He swung back to face the desk and the sheaf of communiqués which had been placed there by the smoothly efficient Joseph Assad. He couldn't describe how much he distrusted the man - he was a turncoat whose loyalties went with wherever the wind was blowing. With the departure of Micah Perga, he had switched allegiance to the advancing armies menacing Nile City. It had been he who had initiated the overtures which had permitted their entry without a fight - and at the same time, had condemned the citizens to rape and pillage at the hands of the ruthless Scandians.

It was about Scandians that the reports had much to say. The wild men of the north were pressing hard upon Ruri's forces. Malenski had been unable to send the promised reinforcements because of the activity of Feodor Chernienko and Alexander Barenkov in the Balkans and southern Russia. Even the cautious Grigor Suskov was showing signs of restlessness, as well as Anatole Barenkov, although he was seriously menaced by the Scandian invasion.

Something had to be done - The prophesy had been right! He had received reports from the north and the east and they were something to be dealt with and yes, he was building a great rage against those who were dispossessing the refugees for the second time, from the lands to which they had been allocated. The prophesy also indicated that he would depart and deal with the situation and if that meant 'destruction' and 'extermination' - So be it!

He reflected for a while longer - those in the 'Fairest of all Lands' including Edom, Moab and Ammon would have the opportunity to recover before Gog finally came to Esdraelon. He moved his hand over the control

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pad and the obsequious Assad entered. Malenski gave his orders clearly and precisely, staring directly into the eyes of the turncoat, watching for any sign of the treachery which he knew waited in the man's soul.

Gubkin had fought his way to the irrigation works at the mouth of the Jordan. The fresh waters of the river had not been allowed to spill into the Salt Sea to be lost. The topography of the region had been altered irrevocably, since the physical changes of a thousand years earlier. At that time, the destruction of the nuclear sites of the political nation of Israel, had changed the contours of the land. The result had been a final conversion of the turgid waters of the Dead Sea into a salt pan. Where once fresh water had flowed in from the river, extensive irrigation works had turned the Jordan valley into an oasis. It now lay before him. Resistance was much stiffer and he was obliged to fight every inch of the way across the flat lands to where the mouth of the old river had once been.

He contemplated the terrain which would be the scene of a pitched battle on the next day. They would take a lot of casualties. The defending army had been well trained and now, if they allowed him to cross the Jordan, they stood to lose a great deal. The sun was setting across the western line of hills which protected Jerusalem. It was a lurid red and the hills no more than black, featureless silhouettes against the fiery sky. Gubkin shivered despite himself, it was like an omen, a confirmation of his darkest thoughts of what he knew had to come.

When he returned to his tent, he found a communiqué from Georgi Malenski. He read it and for a moment he stared at it without comprehension and reread it carefully. He was surprised to find a surge of relief run along his spine. It was like a reprieve from hell. He called his captains to him. They were hardened men, men he could trust to obey without question. Malenski had kept the Scandians back in Nile City, he hadn't explained his reasons but Gubkin had been secretly pleased. He looked at the assembled men, they were expecting a discussion on the battle plan for the next day.

"Prepare your men, we are going home - Malenski wants us in a hurry, he has problems with rebellions in Russia and the Balkans. My guess is, that he's going to leave enough men to garrison Egypt and the North African coast, but the bulk of us will be going back to Europe - with all the supplies we've won!"

There was an exchange of glances. One asked:  
"What about Jerusalem?"

"Jerusalem can wait - Georgi hasn't finished with Michael ben Levi! It's a matter of priorities - the Scandians are threatening the north - amongst other problems!"

Mention of the Scandians was enough to settle any misgiving they might have had.

"One other thing - Georgi's in a hurry! We won't be fighting our way back to Elat - he's sending a fleet of transporters - organise the evacuation and a rearguard to cover us as we fall back and move to the south."

Leah had closely monitored the copies of communiqués about the progress of the approaching invaders along the eastern side of the Salt Sea. The communication office at the villa was open to her and she spent every spare moment keeping abreast of what was happening. Michael spent very few hours at the villa and when he did return late into the night, it was to snatch a few hours sleep before he left in the early light to return to

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Jerusalem. She knew he was co-ordinating the resistance against Malenski's men. It was surely one of the strangest of all anomalies that she was left to care for Georgi's son, together with her own children and all the time, the armies under the orders of the boy's father were encroaching upon the distance which separated them.

She watched the daily movement and could see that they intended to outflank the northern extremity of the Salt Sea where it met the irrigation works of the Jordan. From there, it was no more than a half hour journey by Pod to the villa. Their home stood at the head of a short valley off the main route between the Salt Sea and Jerusalem. She knew that the route was crowded with traffic, mostly supplies and militia making their way to block the advance when it reached the Jordan. Michael was too tired to say a great deal about what was happening and for her part, Leah held her questions in check and allowed him as much sleep as he could get.

The Pod Transit System was becoming unreliable. Michael did find time to warn her about it. The power supply to the network was sadly depleted. The advances made across the North African Administration, had cut off the supply from the power grid in that area and that thrust a greater reliance upon the other main source in the Arabian Peninsular. The demand had outstripped supply and military usage had the obvious priority. Despite the warnings, Leah elected to take a look at the situation for herself. She left the children in the capable hands of one of the house servants and took the road leading out towards the Salt Sea Terminal.

The System inserted her in to the stream of traffic, mostly larger capacity Pods, crammed beyond normal capacity with militia. Young men with eager faces, looking forward to proving their manhood against the hardened enemy who had dared to encroach upon the soil of the fairest of all lands. Leah had heard the rhetoric before and felt a little sickened by it. She understood the need for motivation, but she couldn't help wondering what the words of consolation would sound like when someone had to tell mother, wife or children that their brave warrior would not be returning.

The System delivered her out of the main stream and brought her into what she had imagined to be a deserted vantage point, one which she knew commanded a wonderful view of the Salt Sea and the Hills of Moab beyond. The lookout was swarming with militia personnel. One of the officers hurried in her direction.

"This is a restricted area, sister!"

The greeting was uncompromising and then the young officer looked a little less truculent.

"Sister, ben Levi! I didn't realise it was you. Captain Eli Benjamin at your service."

"I thought I recognised you, Captain Benjamin, we met at the incident on the Temple Mount. I'm sorry to intrude in your restricted area. I wanted to see the enemy. I had no idea -"

"Please! Sister ben Levi - you are a special case!"

The young man was actually blushing. Leah smiled, which seemed to add to his confusion.

"My husband must have forgotten to tell me that this area was restricted - he has a great deal on his mind - perhaps, he thought I could be relied upon to use my common sense!"

"I'm afraid there's nothing to be seen. Gubkin keeps his army well

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hidden. They're moving through the wooded slopes above the fields. Our main force is on this side of the river - you can see them with the naked eye."

"You said 'Gubkin' - do you know the name of the enemy commander?"

"Our intelligence reports place him as being in command. Malenski himself is placed in Nile City."

"What do you know about this Gubkin?"

"Very little, he's competent enough and he's kept his casualties down, despite our attacks - but he's no Pik Sedova!"

"I thought Pik Sedova was dead."

The Captain eyed her sharply.

"That's the rumour, sister ben Levi, but it hasn't been confirmed. I have the feeling Sedova will pop up again somewhere and give us all a nasty surprise!"

"You might be right, Captain Benjamin - I'd better get out of your way."

"I think you might be forced to stay a while, sister ben Levi - the Pod System has gone on the blink!"

Leah eyed the Pod controls, the usual pulsing lights were dead. She sighed and turned to him.

"You're right - that being the case, do you think we could stop being so formal - my name is Leah and you told me yours was Eli - unless, of course, it would be bad for your men's morale to call you anything other than captain?"

He grinned.

"The men's morale is particularly high, it so happens!"

"Then, Eli it is - Tell me, what will happen if you can't hold them at the river?"

His face became serious.

"Our orders are to fight them every inch of the way through the hills, Leah. Don't worry about your place. It will be defended - as will be Jerusalem! Neither place will be allowed to fall into the hands of Gog!"

"You really believe we are dealing with Gog?"

"No doubt under heaven, sister - er - Leah!"

She stared out over the white salt pan. The hills beyond danced in the heat haze. The armies of Gog were hidden in that mirage, but Gog was not with them. Gog was in Egypt. She wondered, did he realise that it was not yet his time? Did he remember that his son stood in the path of his army? Surely, he would turn aside to protect the boy?

"He won't come this way, Eli - you can count on it! This Gubkin will turn back, Gog will leave Egypt and go back whence he came. You can take my word for it!"

Eli Benjamin's mouth went dry. It was said with such conviction. He couldn't quite make up his mind whether it was another prophesy - or wishful thinking. The Pod System came back to life and Leah made her departure, thanking him warmly for the time he had shared with her. He watched her go and felt the confusion of entertaining impossible emotions. It was the product of the tensions of the time - he was a little, but quite hopelessly, in love with the wife of Michael ben Levi!

Their meeting had taken place on the day before Nicholai Gubkin received his orders to evacuate. On that day, from his vantage point above the valley of the Salt Sea, Eli Benjamin watched the stream of transporters making precarious landings along the eastern fringe of the salt pan. He,

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together with all the other captains of the defending force, had received strict orders to do nothing to harass the departure of their enemy. Gubkin completed his evacuation within two days and the lands of Edom, Moab and Ammon were left to recover from the presence of the enemy.

In Nile City, Gubkin and his army were plunged back into the orderly chaos which marked the transportation of tens of thousands of men. It was some time before he could find Georgi Malenski to report to him. As always, the man was moving from one locality to another. He seemed to have an instinct which placed him where he was needed most at a moment of crisis. It was the secret of his organisational skills, but it made him a hard man to pin down. Gubkin finally caught up with him at a huge camp in the delta, where he had just finished conferring with some of his captains. He looked up sharply as Gubkin entered the tent.

"I'm glad you're back, Nicholai! There's a great deal to be done before I leave for Gorki!"

They were alone.

"You are leaving Egypt, Georgi?"

Malenski nodded curtly.

"The situation is becoming critical in Russia and the Balkans - if we're not quick, we will lose everything we've gained - and another enemy is the winter, it has come early and its driving the Scandians down from their strongholds and some of our refugees in Siberia are on the move again. Suskov is unreliable and Chernienko and the Barenkovs are making nuisances of themselves. So, you see, my dear Nicholai, you will have the easier task looking after things here. I will leave you as many men as I can spare, but your task will be to hold the Libyan and Egyptian coast and the Nile valley. I don't think you will have a great deal of trouble with the sparsely populated areas in the Saharan wheat belt, or further south - with the possible exception of the Tibetsi highlands."

The instructions had washed over the startled Gubkin like an irresistible flow. He had been offered no opportunity to protest that he was nothing more than a militia commander, who possessed none of the administrative skills which had made Malenski famous - and successful.

"Another thing, Nicholai - watch Joseph Assad, I wouldn't turn my back on him at a hundred paces! Use him by all means, you will need to do so, he has administrative skills, but watch him very closely - I will leave you some of the men you can trust - mostly your own captains. You've fought a hard campaign and in any case, your men need resting. I will be taking the Scandians with me, every last one of them! We will see how they behave when they're facing their own kind on the north European Plain!"

Malenski stared into Gubkin's thunderstruck face and smiled slightly.

"Never mind, my friend! You'll soon get used to the idea! You will call on talents you never knew you had - and you will find them!"

Events moved quickly, Malenski was in a hurry, he was also grimly determined to deal a crushing defeat on those who had dared to challenge his authority. It was no longer a matter of establishing the hungry refugees, who had depended on him to lead them through the wilderness. He was now the conqueror of the lands upon which he had settled them. The retaliatory raids of Chernienko and the Barenkovs had been nothing more than irritating pinpricks in the past, now they were assuming the greater proportions of being outright rebellions and a challenge to his supremacy. His lines of

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supply and communications were being threatened and his intentions were to inflict a savage reprisal on those who dared to stand in the path of his ultimate destiny. Ruri Karpov in Gorki, was the most threatened. The Scandians had started to roam at will through the lands to the north. On the south, he was being pressured by the mounted Cossacks led by Feodor Chernienko. Grigor Suskov was in a similar position to the north, but he also had to contend with an undisciplined surge from across the Urals, by those who had abandoned the new lands upon which they had been settled. The winter was upon them and if anything, the conditions were even worse than in the previous years.

Georgi Malenski landed back in Gorki with ten thousand men behind him. For the most part, they were Scandians. He had yielded to Gubkin's insistence and had a personal guard of a hundred picked men, whose task was to ensure his safety. Gubkin had ranted and raved and had sworn at his leader, before he had relented and permitted what he had mockingly termed his 'Praetorian Guard'. In normal circumstances, there was a lot of sense in Gubkin's insistence, but Malenski did not see himself as a normal case, he was contemptuous of the perceived threat the Scandians posed. They could not touch him - no more than Pik Sedova had been able to touch him!

The Scandians were sent straight into battle - against their own kind. Malenski awaited the outcome quietly, it was not long in coming. Within ten days, there had been a mass desertion. When the news was brought to him by a clearly alarmed Ruri, he did nothing but sit back in his chair with eyes closed and allow a slight smile to grow around his mouth. Ruri protested.

"This is a disaster, Georgi! The threat to the north is now such that we might find ourselves overrun within four days - if not earlier! The deserters know our strategies, Sedova taught them well, they know all our tricks and ploys, they can outmanoeuvre us and even use our own tactics against us."

Malenski opened his eyes and his smile widened, it was a rare sight and more than a little unnerving.

"You worry too much, my friend! At the same time as I sent the Scandians against their friends, I took the precaution of establishing a large force of men we can rely upon, three hundred kilometres within the Scandian territory. They are equipped with shuttles and transporters. Our Scandian friends will soon find themselves fighting a war on two fronts. The Scandians have yet to become a cohesive force with their new allies. They will be no match for a highly efficient army who have received orders to offer no mercy and to take no prisoners! When we have dealt with the Scandians, we will turn to the south and Feodor will then find himself fighting for his life - incidentally, the same rules will apply, no quarter and no mercy!"

Ruri nodded slowly. He knew he had lost sight of the man Georgi Malenski had once been. He also knew that he and many others who had known the earlier man, would also be dealt with under the new rules - no quarter and no mercy. Malenski had been giving him and his fellow advisors the same warning. Malenski went on, as if he was unaware of the impact of his statement.

"Grigor Suskov has already received the assistance he needs - together with some efficient administrators. Sometimes, I wonder how he ever managed to organise his stewardship in the old days - but then, he was always recognised as being an ultra-conservative! To complete the picture, some of my captains are now dealing with the coasts and the islands of the

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Aegean. It seems they have held out against Sedova's original thrust and have enthusiastically supported Alexander Barenkov's push to the south and west. They are now learning the error of such enthusiasm!"

Ruri excused himself and Malenski watched his troubled assistant make his exit. He was alone again, the house he had allocated for a new life with Elena and Piotr was very silent. There was a chill about the place which no amount of heating seemed to drive out. He had avoided the apartment in which his wife and son had been housed, choosing instead, a small, bare room next to his office. He shunned the luxury which he knew some of his advisors had sought. To have indulged in it would have been a betrayal of his own instincts, which told him that Gog had no place amidst the comforts of men. He was a man apart, he didn't seek the company of men - or of women. A grim thought crossed his mind, it managed to provoke the twist of a smile. He was the devil's monk!

### 45.

The onset of winter came with a savage ferocity. Freezing winds and blizzards swept down from the polar regions and quickly engulfed the fertile plains of southern Russia and beyond. Mountain ranges became virtually impassable. This, as much as any activity of the part of Malenski, slowed down the impetus of the thrusts engineered by Feodor Chernienko and Alexander Barenkov. For his part, Malenski succeeded only in annihilating the forces of his turncoat Scandian captains and their new allies. It took longer than expected, but the victory was complete. For all intents and purposes, in the lands conquered by Gog, the Scandian threat was terminated.

The winter also came to the aid of a sorely pressed Joshua Aristides. The barbarian, lawless and pitiless forces which threatened him, were unable to cross the Pyrenees and he was able to draw breath before he would be obliged to face an inevitable renewed onslaught in the spring. The communication links with his ally, Michael, in Jerusalem, were almost non-existent and the looming threat of the Malenski forces on either side of the Eastern Basin of the Great Sea, made direct contact an unacceptable risk. Joshua realised quite early, that each of the old allies was alone, being forced apart by the overwhelming Satanic forces which were relentlessly moving to the ultimate conclusion of Armageddon.

The wintry conditions impeded the restoration of the lands which had suffered Gubkin's invasion. The populations of Edom, Moab and Ammon, moved back down from their places of refuge in the hills to a scene of despoliation. Ruined crop lands, uprooted orchards and vineyards, in some places, the work of centuries was ravaged as if it had never existed. Michael moved amongst them and was sometimes away for days at a time. Leah knew it was inevitable, it was ingrained within his nature to see himself as a part of their sorrow and despair. He had become the Michael who 'stood up for his people'. She tried to accept it, but it became harder, especially as she advanced into the months of her pregnancy.

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In no way was Michael neglectful of her, he was loving and solicitous - but he was absent for so long and so often, that she spent long hours with nothing much to do but to brood over the inevitable return of the vast Horde which Gog now commanded. From the regular communiqués, she was well aware of the growth in the numbers of those who followed him. It left her a little amazed, it was beyond her comprehension how people could be so deaf and blind to the words of teaching they had received during a thousand years at the feet of Jesus and His Firstlings. It was surely one thing to be overwhelmed by superior forces and be obligated to pay lip service to a conqueror - it was quite another, to willingly join the vast throng who actively supported his cause.

She had never fully understood before, how it would be possible for Armageddon to be the ultimate battle between good and evil. It had been hard to grasp that the forces of Satan would stand against the forces which had remained loyal to their God. It was the eternal conflict and it would be the final resolution in which Satan would be defeated and cast down into the abyss. At some time after the winter there would be a spiritual battle conducted in many different realms and in many different places on the earth.

In some cases, not even physical forces would be involved, it would be a purely spiritual conflict - but on the Plain of Esdraelon, it would have its physical manifestation - and possibly in other places too, where men who had kept faith with their God would stand against the forces whose god was Satan. One thing she understood in her heart, when Gog pitched his pavilion between the sea and the Camp of the Saints, Michael would have to play his part!

As the winter months crept by, it became obvious that Feodor and Alexander were losing the battle. Malenski was still able to move his forces around and confront the poorly armed rebels. The Cossack horsemen were at a total disadvantage in the icy weather and the numbers against them were always superior. It was only a matter of time before the Balkans were cleared and Alexander's stewardship was overwhelmed. Feodor fought a desperate rearguard battle against impossible odds and was eventually cleared from southern Russia and driven down into the Caucasus Mountains. There he was isolated by another strong force which moved in from the east and cut off his line of retreat into the Anatolian plateau.

There was also news of other threats. Michael had come home, cold and exhausted. Leah had had to force food into him and now he lay back in a recliner before a roaring fire. Yet another communiqué had been brought to him. He had read it and then laid back and closed his eyes. She took it from his fingers.

'Top priority to Michael ben Levi: Hostile forces have effected an airborne landing between the Tigris and Euphrates rivers and are driving north to link with enemy units south of the Caucasus. Another landing has been effected south of the Caspian Depression. We have insufficient forces to hold their advance.'

Michael had opened his eyes.

"It will be soon, Leah. We must expect a ring of steel around us - what does it say in Ezekiel? Something to the effect: 'At that time a thought will enter your head and you will plan evil. You will say, 'I will attack a land of open villages, I will fall upon a people living quiet and undisturbed, undefended by walls, with neither gates nor bars'. They will come from

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Persia, Ethiopia and Libya, from Gomer and Beth-Togarmah and from the far recesses of the north. Gog will set up his pavilion between the sea and the holy hill - "

Leah interrupted firmly.

" - and he will meet his end with no one to help him!"

Michael drew her close to him and she leaned against his chest and rested her head against his. She whispered:

"You can't carry the burden alone, Michael! Nor should you even try - this isn't your battle - for that matter it isn't Gog's either! You're both instruments - the real battle is between our Father and Satan - as it has always been! You and Georgi are only puny little men caught up in an eternal conflict. It's enough for you, personally, to show that you are faithful to our God, no more is asked of anyone else. It's the only requirement! We must all remain faithful to God and not despair. He's made it so clear - He will send fire from heaven. He will vanquish the forces Satan will have assembled for the final battle. Your commission is to stand up for your people, to encourage them, to give them heart, to do the things you've been doing over the past few weeks in Edom and Moab and Ammon. Don't despair over the Persian provinces - or any others which might fall to Gog - it has to be, it can't be avoided - they, as well as us, must be put to the test!"

He craned his head to look into her eyes and managed a smile. He kissed her forehead and whispered.

"Did anyone ever tell you that you are a very wise lady, Lean ben Levi?"

"If I was all that wise, I wouldn't spend most of my day worrying about you and wondering what you're doing - or if you're getting into any mischief!"

He kissed her again.

"That's exactly what I do most of the time - worry about you - and if you - and junior - are getting into any mischief."

"I'm glad you mentioned junior - his or her presence tends to prevent me indulging in wild adventures!"

They lay together in mutual comfort for a few moments, the warmth of the fire soaked into them.

"The fire feels good - reports from the Far East tell of extreme conditions again. It's bitterly cold in Siberia, Ambrose is calling for more help, but there isn't much I can do for him."

"I miss Ambrose!"

He looked down at her.

"Do you know, that's the first time I've ever heard you mention Ambrose or anyone else from the Far East, since you came to Jerusalem!"

"I can assure you, it won't happen again! I have no desire to go there, if that's what you're thinking!"

"I plead complete innocence! The thought never crossed my mind - in any case, I don't think it would be very advisable, do you?"

"It isn't an option, Michael. The Far East and Salem and everything which happened there, is like a fantasy. So much has happened in such a short time. It's like a memory from another life!"

"In a way it was - one which will never return."

"I wouldn't want it to!"

They subsided again. Leah watched the flames flaring into the flue.

"Has anything been heard of Gideon and Deborah?"

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"Nothing - apart from the report that they were last seen heading out over the Eastern Basin, north from Egypt."

"There's no report of them landing in Greece or further north?"

"Nothing - I could make enquiries if you like - or you could, you know how to use the facilities - we still have a few agents left in the Balkans - even after the blood bath Georgi ordered!"

He felt her shudder.

"I will never understand how a man can change so much to order the slaughter of women and children - that isn't the man I knew."

Michael nodded grimly.

"He sensed the change was coming, Leah - that's why he left Piotr with us. I'm convinced that he didn't want the boy to see the change, or the sort of man he would become."

"Piotr is such a gentle child, John and Leah worship him and he never runs out of patience with them."

"His mother was a gentle creature."

"Don't believe it, Michael! Remember, I got to know her very well - she was a fighter. Under that gentle exterior, she had steel! If she had been soft, she would never have left Georgi in the first place. She knew what she wanted for her son - and it wasn't what she saw happening."

"I often think, if she had lived, things might have gone differently with Georgi."

"Well, she didn't live - and that must have been part of the master plan as well!"

That evening was one of the last evenings they could spend together for many months. Michael was on the move almost constantly, trying to match every new threat which was brought against the boundaries of his Administration. Slowly, but surely, the ring of steel closed around the fairest of all lands. First of all, Persia fell with surprising ease, followed by the lands which had once been called Mesopotamia. Thereafter, there was a thrust into the Arabian peninsular, which had the effect of cutting them off from the primary remaining source of power.

Feodor still held out in a tiny pocket of land in the Caucasus. Of Alexander, there was no news and slowly they were obliged to accept that he might have fallen in some remote area, under the onslaught of a relentless enemy. Anatolia was lost and then came a period of quiet, it was the proverbial lull before the storm. Gog seemed in no hurry to pitch his pavilion between the sea and the holy hill.

The winter passed and new growth burst out of the trees and the ground. Those who tilled the land, sowed their seed, knowing the improbability of the harvest. The peaceful fields would become the scene of conflict - it was especially so in the Vale of Esdraelon. Michael watched the efforts of the farmers. In the proverbial sense, they bent their backs to tend to the soil with no regard to that which was happening around them, or of that which was sure to come.

He remembered ancient history lessons, as a child in the house of Asher ben Jacobi, where he had been shown precious relics of a bygone age. They were records of wars and conquerors of the past. He particularly recalled one of them. It showed an old man toiling in the field - and behind him was a skirmish between armed men. The farmer hadn't bothered to lift his head.

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It would not be like that on the Day of Armageddon, on that day, the whole world would lift their heads and watch - and see the power of their God manifested in the rain of fire which would descend from out of heaven.

Michael had returned from his survey and for once, was able to spend some time with his wife. She was well advanced in her pregnancy, it could only be a matter of a week or two, before their child was born. The phrase which he had read so many times in the past, returned unbidden to his mind: 'Alas for the woman with child in those days, and for those who have children at the breast!'. He resolutely pushed the thought away, confident that his God would make provision.

Leah looked weary when she greeted him, but the tiredness was quickly masked with a radiant smile. They embraced and he held her thickened body close to him. He felt a great surge of love and pride, which helped to drive the anxiety out of him.

"And - how are the two of you?"

"The two of us are doing very well - with the exception that junior is as restless as his father!"

"One more stick to lay across my back! - Michael ben Levi gets the blame for everything."

"In this case, with good reason!"

Luke emerged from the communications room, his face was solemn but it brightened up when he saw them together.

"About time you decided to pay us a visit!"

Leah smiled, the two men had become very close during the preceding months and there was certainly no distance between them when it came to speaking their minds. Any misgivings she might have entertained about Luke in the early days, had, by this time, become well and truly dispelled. Michael raised his eyes to the roof.

"I think I might find another roost for the night!"

"I'd better not find you in another nest!"

Luke was solemn again.

"You'd better take a look at this, Michael."

He handed over the communiqué he had been holding. Michael took it and read. The muscles in his jaw tightened, apart from that, his expression didn't change.

"Malenski is on the move!"

Luke nodded.

"We've had reports of a massive build up of transporters and shuttles all along the coast of Anatolia and Greece. As you know, the Cyprian peninsula has been under attack by strong forces for the last ten days. We've been forced to retreat into the mountains. It doesn't look as if the new concentration has anything to do with clearing Cyprus. My analysis is that we are the target!"

Michael nodded slowly.

"So, Gog is coming to Armageddon - at last!"

Leah looked at him sharply. Michael sounded as if it gave him great satisfaction.

"We must make preparations, Michael!"

"For what, Luke? To try to repel them when they land? The landing site is no mystery, we know precisely where it will be! Georgi will come directly to Esdraelon, he won't be diverted to the north and the south. He will send his

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army - his Horde - to where the words of destiny indicate. He will be unable to do otherwise! We always thought the hooks in his jaws were hunger and deprivation - we were wrong! The hooks in his jaws are the words of the prophets and the knowledge of his own destiny!"

Leah murmured softly.

"And the hooks in your jaws are the same, Michael!"

Luke persisted.

"Are we to do nothing, Michael!? You must make a show of some sort - the people will expect it! They're looking to you - you are the mystical defender. If you do nothing, you might well weaken the trust they have in you."

"We will do something, Luke. I want you to move our main force to line the hilltops on both sides of the Plain. I want the shields polished until they shine like glass! - and I want each man to be issued with two shields - "

"Two!?"

"Two shields! Instructed the captains, when the invading force comes in to land, they are to turn their shields upward to catch the sun. The men are to be spaced out so that they look as if they're twice the number - understood?"

"No! But it will be done - what do you want to do, dazzle the pilots so that they crash? If so, I don't think it will work!"

"I want to give the landing force the impression that they're heavily outnumbered, if we can make them cautious, they will be discouraged from venturing into the hills. I want to keep them on the plain until Gog arrives!"

"And then?"

"Then - it will be in the hands of God!"

When they were alone at last, Leah was very quiet. Michael watched the firelight flickering on her face. He said nothing. Eventually, she broke the silence.

"What do you think will happen?"

"Malenski will land in force and establish a base camp, after that, it will be anyone's guess."

"Can you be totally sure that he will land where you think? We're leaving ourselves wide open if he chooses another target."

"I'm sure it will be through Esdraelon, his sense of destiny will prove to be irresistible. On the other hand, it is the most logical path to follow to connect with his armies squeezing us from the north and east. The valley cuts nearly through to the Jordan. We can also expect Gubkin to move in from the south - not along the eastern side of the Salt Sea this time, through Moab, Edom and Ammon, but along the coast. In that way, Jerusalem will be encircled and the stage will be set for a thrust down the valley of the Jordan, to take us by the back door. I have tried to cover all the routes."

"But - when it comes down to it, Michael, we simply haven't enough men to hold them off."

"I don't anticipate the need for us to do so, my darling."

"The mystical fire from heaven?"

"Perhaps, not so mystical as you might imagine!"

She was all attention. He grinned at her.

"There's something you haven't told me, Michael!"

"You remember the captain who took such a shine to you?"

She eyed him steadily.

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"I wasn't aware that anyone 'took a shine to me' as you so crudely put it!"

"Oh! Come, Leah - you remember Eli Benjamin! The young fellow you met on your secret trip to the lookout!"

She glared at him in accusation.

"Michael ben Levi! I believe you're jealous! - and the poor man has done nothing to earn it - neither have I!"

"Quieten down! You'll make the baby excited and he'll be kicking all night! If I was jealous, I would copy David the King and send him in the forefront of the battle line - but I've done the opposite, he's one of my aides - and that's how I know of his unrequited love for the lady of his dreams, who will have nothing to do with him!"

Leah subsided.

"I'm very glad to hear it!"

"To get back to the subject in question. Young Eli has a brother - Saul - now, there's an imaginative bit of naming - King Saul was of the tribe of Benjamin, if I remember my biblical history correctly."

"No doubt you do!"

"This Saul Benjamin is very keen on astronomy. Eli tells me that he's quite excited about an approaching comet. I know - we've been visited by comets before, but this one is calculated to come very close to the Earth - just how close, he hasn't been able to tell with any accuracy."

"And you think this comet is going to provide the Godly fire from heaven."

"Stranger things have happened. The timetable is in God's hands and he's quite able to adjust the transit of a comet to agree with it. I remember someone telling me once that the miracle of the parting of the Red Sea in the time of Moses, was not so much that it happened - because it had been known to happen at other times, when a strong east wind arose - but the miracle was that it happened at precisely the right time for the transit of the Children of Israel and then ceased to happen, so that the army of Pharaoh was drowned in the flood of returning waters."

"It's an interesting theory, but can we really place all our trust in a supposition."

"I'll quote you something from the fourth book of Ezra, it goes something like this: 'And they shall pour out over every high and eminent place a horrible star'. There's a lot more besides. Revelation also mentions vials of wrath and one of them concerned a star which will fall to the earth. There can be no doubt that the Time of the End will be a fearful time, but we can also be confident that those to remain with their God shall receive His protection."

"When I read about these things, Michael, I sometimes wonder if the cure might not be worse than the illness. If we are dealing with a star which will send down fire from heaven, can we be sure that it won't only consume Gog and his Horde. Won't it also threaten us too - there won't be much separating us?"

"What little there is, will be sufficient - of that we can be sure, Our Father will cover His own in the shelter of His hand!"

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46.

It was three more days before Gog's Horde started to pour into the Plain of Esdraelon. The confident approach of the huge transporters and their flanking shuttles, and the unhesitating descent to the rich croplands of the valley between Carmel and Megiddo on the one hand and the Galilean Highlands on the other, displayed either contempt or a supreme confidence. Michael had hurried there as soon as he received the word of the despatch of the armada from Anatolia and Greece. He went to the forward base on Mount Carmel and watched as his troops on the hillsides obeyed their instructions to catch and reflect the rays of the rising sun. It was certain that they had captured the attention of the captains on the approaching craft, but it didn't slacken the pace of the invasion. Vessel after vessel thundered from the sky and soon the valley was filled with the army which disgorged from their bellies.

In one respect, Michael's strategy appeared to work. The invaders busied themselves in occupying the valley floor. A number of huge camp sites were established, but there was no attempt to try their steel against the defenders watching from the hills. Michael moved to the great rock of Megiddo, which had given its name to the battle which was yet to be fought. Once, it had been a great city, which had commanded the best pass from the Great Sea and onwards north to Galilee and Damascus. It had always been a point of great strategic importance. This occasion would be different, they faced impossible odds. Michael fought down the thought. He was not dealing with impossible odds, because, on this occasion, it was the Lord God who was supreme and He would provide the defence.

The small towns and villages in the valley had been hastily abandoned. He was quite sure that those in the fields had not returned to their homes for their goods, and those who had slept on the roof of their houses, had not gone down for their clothing - they had fled to the hills and abandoned everything.

Late in the day, he watched a lone shuttle come in low from the sea. It landed close to one of the abandoned villages. He felt his pulse quicken, Gog had arrived for his appointment with his destiny. Michael was certain that there would be no attack that night. Malenski would not be hurried, he too, would know that it was not quite the right time. Michael returned to the haven of his home in the Judaeian Hills. Communiqués awaited him. Gubkin was on the move, as had been predicted - and the forces to the north and east were exerting pressure on the defenders. Gog was tightening his steel noose, forcing the condition where the Camp of the Saints would be encompassed around and inviting the retaliation of Godly wrath.

Michael was worried about Leah. She was very close to her time. She had tried to make light of the situation, but he could see that she felt desperately vulnerable.

"I won't be long now, Michael - the midwives tell me to expect our child at any time. Sometimes I wonder if I ought not to send them all away. They walk around with long faces and whisper behind their hands, they're so determined to tell me nothing about what is going on that they even tried to stop me from going into the Communication Centre. I soon put an end to that

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nonsense! I must know what's happening, Michael - not to know, would drive me insane."

"I'm sure they mean well - they don't want you distracted - or upset - and neither do I!"

"It would upset me much more not to know what's happening. When it's time for me to concentrate on my job - then I'll do as they say - but until then, I have every intention of carrying on as usual."

"You're a very determined woman, Leah ben Levi!"

"I've heard that before! Now, tell me what's been happening."

"Georgi has arrived! He's in the little village close to the city of Sarid - right in the centre of the plain. His Horde is encamped all around him and they've taken over the floor of the valley. The early flood seems to have eased down. Now, the transporters are bringing in supplies. They look as if their intention is to stay for some time."

"Man proposes - God disposes!"

"That's the spirit! - Georgi is displaying a peculiar mixture of fatalism and military strategy. It's a conflict between Gog, who is predestined to be stopped in his tracks - and military opportunism and confidence, which tells him that it won't take much to sweep away our resistance and complete his grand plan of conquest."

"Georgi was always a complex man."

"I would give a great deal to have a face to face talk with him right now!"

"Don't you dare even think of it, Michael! Don't even consider it - I promise you, I'll have the baby right now, if you do!"

Michael grinned and sighed.

"As I said - a very determined woman - I promise you, I won't be led into doing anything rash."

"Even if Georgi has similar thoughts and tries to initiate a meeting?"

"I can assure you, it isn't in the scheme of things for Michael to have communion with Gog - "

"That didn't answer my question, Michael - what if Jonathan wants to talk to David!?"

He didn't have to answer, she could read it in his eyes. For the first time, she felt real fear and uncertainty. She bit her tongue, it wasn't the time to become a clinging wife who would use the impending birth as a lever against her husband. She prayed in her heart that the situation would never arise.

Michael glanced at the chronometer, she followed his eyes.

"Are you expecting another report?"

"No - just a couple of visitors - "

"At this hour!"

"You can go to bed - it might be the best for you."

"Not unless you want to keep your meeting confidential."

"Not in the least! - In fact, you might be interested in both of my guests. One is Captain Eli - and the other, is his brother, Saul."

He laughed at the flash of protest in her eyes.

"I'm only teasing you, Leah! I think you might be very interested in what Saul has to tell us."

He couldn't be drawn to tell her more. They waited together in front of the fire and both of their thoughts were on the vast camps of the invaders

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who occupied the place of destiny. Promptly on the hour, the outer door control sounded and they heard their visitors being admitted. They were ushered into the darkened room. Michael gestured to the lighting control and raised the lux level. He rose to greet them, Leah remained in her chair, the privilege of her condition.

"Captain Eli, greetings - "

"Greetings, Administrator - this is my brother Saul."

Eli's eyes looked beyond Michael towards Leah.

"Greetings, sister ben Levi."

"Greetings, Captain Benjamin - it's good to meet you again. Greetings, brother Benjamin."

"I'd nearly forgotten! You've met my wife before, Eli!"

Leah intervened, her voice very even.

"Briefly - the last occasion, was when I strayed to where I was supposed not to be - it wasn't really my fault - my husband neglected to tell me!"

Michael grinned.

"I shall have to speak very severely to your husband!"

There was general polite laughter and the guests were ushered to chairs. Eli set the agenda.

"Administrator, I thought you ought to talk with Saul. I mentioned to you some of the things he's been telling me and I thought it might be significant."

Saul intervened for the first time, he seemed a little embarrassed by all the attention.

"My observations have been recorded, Administrator. I'm sure they would have been brought to your attention if they had been considered important."

"Not everything gets brought to my attention, brother Saul. Why don't you tell me about your observations?"

"Perhaps I should explain the duties to which I have been assigned in the Transit system. I am attached to the technical advisors who are responsible for the Suborbiter transporters, planning their various trajectories, and their integrity."

Michael glanced quickly at Leah, she had gone a little pale. Saul caught the glance, he looked mortified.

"I am so sorry, sister Leah - I had overlooked the tragic incident - "

Leah stopped him.

"It's quite all right, brother Saul. It was just the technical terms you used, I last heard them in the report of the investigation - "

"Would you like to go to bed, my dear?"

"No, Michael, I would like to stay. It's just my condition - please excuse me."

Saul hurried on.

"A parameter of my duties is to determine a clear passage for our carriers. There is still a considerable amount of space junk left over from the decades prior to the First Resurrection and the Great Destruction. There's a substantial amount which still circles our planet and occasionally drops out of orbit. I'm sure you have received reports from time to time?"

There was a chorus of nods.

"Another factor for which we must look, is the incidence of natural

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material. By this, I mean meteorite fragments or asteroids of indeterminate size, which are always crossing the orbital path of the Earth."

Leah leaned forward.

"Where do these fragments originate, brother Saul?"

"They come from various sources, some are cyclic - so-called meteorite showers, which usually follow the path of comets which were previously plotted and subsequently vanished. There is a theory that these showers are the debris of such comets which have disintegrated. Apart from these, there are other sources, some coming from far beyond the outer extremity of the Solar System. There is a vast reservoir of cometary material in a spatial area called the Oort Clouds, which is a considerable distance beyond the boundaries of the Solar System. From there also, comets tend to return to our vicinity at regular intervals."

"... And these fragments are all around us, brother Saul? Flying around over our heads! Don't they ever fall to earth?"

"Oh! Certainly, all the time - but I must emphasise that they are usually microscopic and cause very little damage and most of the time they pass unnoticed. We have all seen so-called shooting stars - these are minute fragments which do not penetrate the atmosphere and burn up on contact - hence the spectacular trail of sparks."

Michael nodded.

"... But some come in larger sizes, brother Saul?"

Saul nodded vigorously.

"Very much so! We have recorded instances of very large fragments reaching the surface, these cause widespread devastation. Fortunately, it isn't a very frequent occurrence, but in the remote past, there was a much greater incidence - you should understand, this happened long before recorded history, perhaps millions of years ago. We have only to look at the impact craters on the surface of the Moon and of the planet Mars, to see how both of those bodies have been showered with enormous fragments in times past."

Michael looked at him steadily.

"Is it your belief that we are to be visited by another shower of these massive fragments, brother Saul?"

Their guest shifted nervously.

"It is probably foolish to predict such a thing, brother Michael. There have been several near misses recorded during the last eleven hundred years. Some years before the Destruction, a vast crater was formed in Siberia, which devastated the surrounding area - fortunately, in those days, it was a lightly populated region. Some years later, a fragment of an asteroid passed between the moon and the earth without colliding. If it had collided, there would have been a disaster which would have made the Great Destruction insignificant!. I must emphasise, the potential for such a disaster is always present."

"What's the size of these chunks of rock, Saul."

"Eli - the one which I mentioned, was calculated to be no more than a kilometre in its greatest diameter - its mass, plus its momentum, would have been sufficient to cause cataclysmic devastation. Its impact would have set off a chain reaction of earthquakes, on land and under the sea, in turn, vast tidal surges would have washed over the land. Volcanoes would have been activated. The maritime cities of the world would have been wiped out, with

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appalling loss of life. One scientist, at the time, put it this way: 'The earth would have reverberated like a bell'. There was always the possibility that it might have been disturbed in its orbit, or tilted on its axis - the consequences for the climate would have been unpredictable."

There was a profound silence. Michael stretched his legs and stared at the floor.

"I'm sure you have a reason for telling us this, brother Saul."

Saul nodded abruptly and stood up. It was obvious that he was extremely agitated.

"Brother Michael, it is my belief that we are on the threshold of another near miss!"

Michael lifted his eyes.

"Another near miss, Saul - or a strike!?"

Saul met his eyes.

"Hard to say! Could be either! It will be a near thing!"

"Surely, such a - missile - should be easy to see? How is it that we can't? Can you be certain that it's heading in our direction?"

"I've seen it! I've calculated its trajectory!"

"You've seen it - why not us?"

"Because its coming in at an angle to the equatorial plane of the Earth. In other words, its coming in on a slantwise course and is only visible in the southern skies. I can assure you that it's causing a great deal of anxiety in South America, South Africa and Australasia!"

Michael nodded grimly.

"With whom, regular communications are cut!"

Leah intervened.

"How is it that you've seen it?"

Saul turned to her.

"We maintain contact with the southern hemisphere - its part of our duties. They asked us for our opinion and so, I took a suborbiter flight and tracked its path. I must tell you, its an impressive sight, quite visible. My assessment is that it is a comet which doesn't fit any regular orbital pattern - a rogue, I suppose you could call it. I estimate the nucleus as being ten to fifteen kilometres in diameter. As it nears the Sun, it's tail is building and can be expected to become more than a hundred million kilometres in length. My calculations indicate that it will pass very close to the Earth - enough to cause a great deal of damage - already, its appearance is causing widespread panic in the southern continents. You can hardly tell day from night!"

Again, there was a moment of silence, they looked from one to another. Michael murmured:

"... a great multitude of stars upon the earth ... and the stars shall be stirred to cause fear towards the east and the west ... and there shall arise great and thick clouds full of wrath, and also a star, that they terrify all the earth and them that dwell therein. And they shall pour out over every high and eminent place a horrible star ...' It goes on, the fourth book of Ezra is very explicit!"

Leah turned to Saul.

"How close is it - when will it become visible to us?"

"It is already well within the orbit of Mars, it is travelling very fast and it is my belief that it will be visible to us, even in daylight, as soon as tomorrow!"

"What can be done about it, brother Saul."

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"There is absolutely nothing that can be done to change its course! There is very little that can be done to avoid the effect of its passing. The only thing I suggest is to try to find a safe haven until it has passed."

"You seem sure that it will pass."

"I hope that it will do so, for if it hits the Earth, given its momentum and size, it would most certainly be the end of us all!"

Leah stared at him and absently touched her stomach.

"I'm sorry, sister Leah."

"You have no need to apologise, you're only giving us the facts."

Michael looked through the window into the darkness. Consciously or otherwise, he was facing the direction of the Plain of Esdraelon.

"Perhaps the coming of Gog does herald the End of Time, after all. Perhaps, our interpretation of the scriptures isn't entirely accurate."

There was another heavy silence. Leah asked a question.

"What will be the effect if it doesn't hit us?"

Saul resumed his seat.

"It will very much depend how close it comes. I mentioned that the tail of the comet is already a hundred million kilometres in length. It is formed by the impact of radiation emissions from the sun upon the nucleus of the comet. It is the effect of that the scientists call the Solar Wind. The nucleus is formed of an accretion of solid material and ice. Part of this breaks away and streams out behind, to form the tail. Much will depend on the size of the fragments which have broken away from the nucleus. Sometimes, it is extremely fine material, little more than dust, but of course, if the particles are larger - and depending upon how large and how close the tail comes to the Earth - the results could be quite catastrophic!"

Michael turned aside from the window and faced him.

"Would the results be generalised or local?"

Saul blinked.

"I believe the results would be random, Administrator. We can't assess the spread of material within the tail. It might be dust in one place and large, asteroid sized pieces in another. There's always the chance that the comet might break apart when it comes within the gravitational effect of the Earth - in effect, it might shatter, the results would be quite unpredictable."

Michael nodded.

"Would you advise getting the population under cover?"

"Definitely - to be exposed would invite disaster. Of course, if the comet scores a direct hit - !"

He left the conclusion to their imagination.

Michael was galvanised into action. He touched the control pad and Luke soon responded.

"Luke, call an emergency meeting of all captains - yes, ALL captains. I want them all here within the hour! Rest assured, Gog will not attack tonight - trust me!"

He turned to Saul, as the startled Luke made his exit.

"Brother Saul, I would appreciate your presence. I want you to tell our captains what to expect - and I don't think I could do the subject justice. In the meantime, I would welcome your suggestions for protective measures."

Luke returned, he didn't have the chance to report.

"The next task, Luke. I want a meeting of all the civic leaders of the areas under our control. I know what the hour is - I don't care if you get them

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out of their beds. I want them here in two hours - and take no arguments! I know how persuasive you can be!"

He grinned at his startled assistant.

"I'm afraid there won't be much sleep for us tonight - except you, my darling - YOU are going to bed!"

"You might be able to bully the rest of the population, Michael ben Levi - but I am staying right here! What sort of rest do you think I would get?"

Michael raised his eyes to the ceiling and grinned at Eli. The young captain flickered a response. He looked as if he wasn't quite sure whose side to take.

"Perhaps you could use your undoubted powers of persuasion and try to convince this stubborn woman to listen to her husband! Saul and I have some planning to do!"

Eli jerked to his feet and eyed the retreating backs of his brother and his host, with a look akin to desperation. Leah said quietly.

"Surely, it isn't such a difficult assignment, Captain Benjamin."

The luckless captain sat down abruptly and eyed his hostess nervously.

"I can assure you - I don't find it difficult at all - er - that is - "

Leah threw back her head and laughed.

"I'm sorry, Eli - I didn't intend to embarrass you - but don't try to persuade me to go to my room, regardless of what Michael says. I can assure you, it will be a lost cause. Instead, you can tell me what's happening on the Plain of Esdraelon."

47.

Gubkin emerged from his tent and squinted his eyes against the keen, cold wind which swept down from the mountains. He looked into it and tried to visualise the city of Jerusalem, which was no more than forty kilometres to the south east. He was nearer to the Camp of the Saints than was Georgi Malenski. He could strike into the Judaeian Hills and be on their doorstep within two hours - but that was not the way Georgi Malenski had called it. He had disdained to bring the main force to the coastal strip which Gubkin now occupied. Instead, he had followed the irresistible urge to place himself in the comparatively narrow valley of Esdraelon, where he was menaced to the north and the south, and to place himself at the mercy of the defenders.

Gubkin snorted angrily, the Vale of Sharon would have been the better choice. It stretched along the coast and although Michael ben Levi could have been counted on to defend every inch of the way to his capital, it would have been the more viable option.

It was just dawn, but there was something about the increasing light which struck a chill into him. It was nothing to do with the biting wind. The quality of the light itself was pearly grey, unlike a normal sunrise. In this land, where superstitions and spiritual expectations were paramount, there would be some who would have described it as ominous. Gubkin cursed his own susceptibility. There was already too much talk of omens and prophecies and

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destiny. The rank and file of the army he commanded, was full of murmurings and mutterings and talk of impossible odds and the inevitability of defeat and in Gubkin's opinion, his own captains were not doing enough to counteract it, and he had told them so during the briefing on the previous evening.

Privately, he had to agree with the thought that it all came back to the attitude of their Commander. Instead of acting like the leader of an undefeated army, who now faced a limited defence which would easily be overcome, Georgi Malenski was acting like a man faced with impossible odds and certain annihilation.

Gubkin had established his camp close to the ancient city of Joppa. His progress along the coast from the Nile had been relatively unhindered. He was quite certain that it was no reflection on the size or the metal of the defending force. Michael ben Levi had elected not to stand against him. Gubkin had come to the conclusion that both of the opposing commanders were caught up in the same sense of inevitability. He asked himself the question he had once asked Malenski. Were they ensuring that they fulfilled the prophesy because it stated that events HAD to happen in a certain way, or were they trying to drive the prophesy to suit themselves, taking some sort of perverse refuge in it?

As the baleful light intensified, Gubkin came to a decision, he would leave his capable captains to watch the defenders - who in turn, were watching them. As for himself, he would seek an interview with his Commander in Chief and try to get a few answers. He glanced to the east once more, the dawn light was really quite peculiar. It was as if the full moon was rising together with the sun. It was not unlike the conditions in the almost forgotten days of the Kingdom of Peace, when sometimes, the moon and the sun were brilliantly shining at the same time - this light was different however, and in any case, could not be attributed to the moon, which had set only a few hours earlier.

Within the hour, he was making a lone flight over the still waters of the Eastern Basin. The sense of unreality, the almost spectral quality of the light and the stillness of the atmosphere, was increasingly unsettling. He resolved not to be absent for too long. He took a wide detour around the bulk of Mount Carmel. It was the hinge point of one line of defenders which were strung out between his army and that of Georgi Malenski in the valley beyond. He chose to come in from the sea and in so doing, was confronted with a phenomenon.

To one side of the rising sun, was an aura of light. It's source was below the horizon, but whatever it was, it was sending out an arc of pearl white brilliance. Gubkin's shuttle didn't have the altitude to see over the Galilean mountains. Their crests were outlined starkly against the garish glare. He landed in a hurry and made his way to the small villa Georgi had commandeered as his headquarters.

He hadn't seen Malenski since the morning when he had been placed in charge of Egypt and North Africa. Gubkin realised that he wasn't quite sure just how long ago that had been, but it was certainly six months. He was appalled at the change in Malenski's physical appearance - but there was something more. The eyes were more fixed and controlled. A smile hovered around his lips, as if he was taking a grim joy in the preparations for his own suicide. Gubkin wondered why he was compelled to think in those terms. Was it possible that the man who imagined himself to be the Gog, was looking forward for the nightmare to end?

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Malenski walked towards him as one of his aides led Gubkin into the bare room he was using. The visitor took in the surroundings, without taking his eyes off his leader. The lack of comforts was typical, that much, at least had not changed. It was the usual disdain of attachments to property and people. Georgi Malenski was still a man who preferred to walk alone.

"Greetings, Nicholai! I wondered how long it would be before you came to visit the scene of the last stand!"

The hand grip was firm. The intense physical strength and dynamism was still there. Malenski's eyes held his steadily. Gubkin twitched a responsive smile.

"It's good to meet again, Georgi - but - what's all this talk of a last stand? Don't you realise we have an irresistible force."

"An irresistible force, you say? Perhaps, but we face an immovable object - and when the two come together, there can be only one outcome - annihilation!!"

Gubkin moved to the window, it faced the west. He turned to Malenski.

"We have a morale problem, Georgi. There is a great deal too much pessimistic talk amongst our rank and file. They are filled with a sense of foreboding. It goes something to the effect that having now marched from Egypt, they will never return - or for that matter, see the fields and forests of their homeland. I've told my captains to tell them that our northward march brings us closer to Russia and that we have a mere detour to settle the matter of occupation of this area and that we've already got half of the country under our control, with only the high ground remaining. I've told them, we're on a winning streak and we have an invincible commander - everything is in our favour! But still, the murmurings and mutterings continue - so please, Georgi - don't talk of irresistible forces and immovable objects - and annihilation!"

Malenski laughed softly.

"Gubkin! I love you like a brother, you've never been shy to speak your mind - and you have an unimaginative soul! You count the numbers and look at your resources and you come to a logical conclusion and you won't allow yourself to be swayed by prophecies and omens. Sometimes, I wish I was not cursed with having spiritual antenna which tells me otherwise!"

Gubkin eyed him with genuine affection. Georgi was a much younger man, but his haggard face had aged him. It was obvious that he ate very sparingly and didn't look after himself physically. Gubkin had no doubt, that under his shirt, his ribs would have stood out through the skin.

"So, Georgi - When do we make our move? I thought you might have given the signal today. You have all your men in position and your supplies in place, haven't you? I'm in the same position. All that's needed is for me to close the gap and for both of us to invest Carmel and then we can roll back the defence on this side of your valley and perhaps isolate Megiddo - that will be a tough nut to crack, it always has been!"

Georgi's smile widened.

"You have it all worked out, Nicholai! - but we have to wait for a while to put your master plan in operation. Before we make our move, I want to position our armies in the east, along the mountains above the Jordan valley."

Gubkin eyed him doubtfully. The response was too quick, too well rehearsed. Georgi had a secret agenda.

"Every day you delay, gives the defenders the opportunity to

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consolidate and to bring up reinforcements. They will get our measure - we have always struck before, when the enemy was off balance."

Malenski nodded.

"I'm aware of that, Nicholai - but we must do this my way. I have my reasons for wanting the armies in the perfect position before we strike our combined blow."

Gubkin didn't argue, he wandered to the window again. Malenski followed the move with his eyes.

"You seem very interested in the scenery, Nicholai."

Gubkin peered out, there was no evidence of the strange glow in the sky - but then, he was facing in the wrong direction.

"I saw something strange when I turned to come in to land. Haven't you seen the light in the sky?"

Malenski's smile faded, the intensity which replaced it was almost frightening.

"Light? What light?"

"I'm surprised none of your people have mentioned it - a light in the east - Come outside, you might see it - or perhaps, it's my imagination!"

Malenski followed him from the room and the outer entrance to the villa and then along the outside to where they could see the east. Gubkin breathed a little easier, he had wondered if the rising sun would mask the strange glow - if anything, it was greater. Malenski stared at it silently for a long time. The pearl white glow had intensified so that the normal sunlight was somehow adulterated by it. Malenski's voice was harsh.

"What is it?"

Gubkin shrugged.

"I don't know, there's nothing to be seen. I wasn't high enough to see over the eastern ranges - I suppose - I suppose, it isn't some problem with our people moving in through the hills on the over side of the Jordan? Are they having any trouble?"

Malenski shook his head.

"The last reports indicate nothing unusual. Resistance is light. We can't bring the defending army to battle. We're meeting the usual guerrilla tactics - hit and run - nothing more than nuisance raids to slow us down. Nothing which could account for what we can see. To create a glow of those proportions, it would have to be a massive fire - but it doesn't look like the flames of a fire - and there's no smoke."

Malenski summoned his aides. They could add nothing to his suppositions. He felt the familiar surge of adrenaline, the rising sense of inevitability. He would soon be confronted with the immovable object. This was the start of the final phase. Factors beyond his control and beyond the control of Michael ben Levi, were about to be introduced into the equation. He sensed that Michael was waiting just as much as he was himself. Gubkin had asked the direct question, the same question that was being asked by his captains, but not expressed in words. When would he order the attack which would move his men out of the Vale of Esdraelon? He had evaded the answer, but he knew it - he would never order the movement of his men. Gog and his Horde were where they had to meet their end and they would remain until the ordained moment was realised.

The Command post on Carmel, was very conscious of being the kernel within the two arms of a pincer. The massive army which Georgi Malenski

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had landed, occupied the valley to the north. The density of men and materials made it impossible to estimate its size, but it was certainly vastly greater than that of the defenders. Behind them, the advancing forces commanded by Gubkin, had come to a halt. Carmel stood in their path. It commanded the only access that Jerusalem and the Judaeen Hills had to the coast of the Great Sea. It was only a matter of time before a combined attack would be launched. The urgency of the situation was impressed upon Michael ben Levi - he was told bluntly by his captains, either take decisive action by launching an attack - or expect to find himself totally encircled - but the order to attack the invading forces was not forthcoming.

Michael had spent the remainder of the night occupied with meetings with his senior advisors and the leaders of those communities who were still free to make the journey to the villa. Saul Benjamin repeated his predictions to each group and fielded the inevitable choruses of alarm. Each returned to his area of responsibility, hardly comforted by the instruction that there was little which could be done, but to try to seek as much cover as possible and hope that the potential fallout from the passing of the comet would not be of catastrophic proportions. When the last group had left, Michael turned to Saul and shrugged wearily.

"I thank you for your help, brother Saul. It was the best we could do with the limited information we have. They couldn't be left in ignorance, but there was very little we could tell them which was reassuring."

"There used to be a saying: 'where ignorance is bliss, 'tis folly to be wise'. In this case, I think the folly would have been to leave them unprepared."

They returned to the reception room where they had left Leah and Eli several hours earlier. They were both asleep in recliners in front of the embers of the fire. The room was cold. Michael shook his head in exasperation.

"My wife is too determined for her own good, sometimes!"

"My little brother is much the same!"

Leah moaned in her sleep and moved her head in her sleep. Michael put his arms around her and she woke up abruptly. Saul had moved to the window, looking out into the darkness.

"It will soon be dawn."

"A time when attacks are launched and expected."

Their voices had woken Eli, who looked as if he thought he was guilty of dereliction of duty for daring to fall asleep. Michael addressed him in mock seriousness.

"Tell me, Eli - are your men ready for an attack?"

"Probably more so than their captain, at the moment, brother Michael!"

Saul asked softly.

"Tell me, Michael - do you expect an attack today?"

Michael hesitated and then shook his head slowly.

"There will be no attack - not today. I suggest, not until your comet has passed - then we shall see."

Eli was obviously anxious to return to his command. Saul politely declined the offer of a bed. Michael and Leah watched their visitors depart. The Pod's lights disappeared into the darkness. Michael put his arm around his wife and led her back into the house. The morning air was very cold.

"The winter bites - and you feel frozen! It was very foolish to fall

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asleep, with the fire dying down. Now, I think it's high time you went to bed."

"And what about you? You haven't slept for twenty-four hours and then, it was only for two or three. You can't fight a war when you're exhausted."

"So far, we haven't been asked to fight a war."

"Not with swords and spears perhaps - but you're fighting your war in another way - your's is a mental war, second guessing what Georgi or Gubkin will do next. You must get some rest, Michael! - now!"

He hesitated.

"If only for a couple of hours - you must!"

He nodded reluctantly.

"All right - If I'd known you would be such a nagging wife, I might have thought twice!"

"It's nice to know you're having second thoughts, especially when I'm about to about to make you a father!"

He held her at arms length and eyed her critically.

"Not right now, I hope! - I WILL have time for those two hours sleep?"

"I'm guaranteeing nothing!"

Their bedroom faced to the east. With the coming of the dawn, all thoughts of sleep were banished. As the sun rose above the hills which separated them from the Salt Sea, it was accompanied by the halo of the approaching comet. They stood together in the window and watched the light intensify. He felt her shiver and tightened his grip across her shoulders. She whispered:

"A star of ill omen!"

"A horrible star - which will shower other stars down upon the earth. I didn't quote all there was to be read in the fourth book of Ezra. There will be other climatic disturbances and we can expect a great deal of destruction. I'm very much afraid that the works we have built up during the Time of Peace, will be broken down. When the comet has passed, we might find that there's very little left!"

"But, you do think it will pass, Michael - this isn't the actual End - The End of Time?"

"I believe that we're facing the time when Our Father will intervene and send down fire from heaven. I believe we shall see the destruction of Gog and his Horde on the Plain of Esdraelon - we will see the physical expression of a vast battle which will be conducted in every realm of eternity and in every place where the souls of men are to be found upon this earth. Esdraelon will be the focal point of the physical battle, but there will be other interventions in the physical sense, upon those men who have thrown in their lot with Satan and have rejected the Godly teachings of Jesus and His Firstlings, for the past thousand years.

This battle will coincide with the general sorting out of the sheep from the goats - but whether this is the actual End of Time, for that answer we can only wait and see."

She shivered again.

"And into this turmoil, I am going to bring forth a child - what right have I to do that - especially after the Lord Jesus gave that specific warning!"

"We were not to know the day or the hour, Leah! Our Father hasn't made us privy to the exact moment when He intends to put His plans into effect. He didn't do so prior to the First Resurrection and I'm quite sure that

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there were children being born then, right up to the very last moment. Our brethren in those distant days were taught to continue their lives as if the Lord Jesus was not to return in the Second Coming, but, on the other hand, to expect Him every day - and that was what they did. We have to do the same.

What was it that Father Joel used to say? Something he read from the time of the Second Apostles, I think. 'If I knew the Lord was to come tomorrow, I would still plant a tree today!' Wise words, from a wise man. Our lives must continue until our Heavenly Father decides that we have had enough time. The End of Time will come into effect when He is satisfied that the very last possible instance of His mercy and long suffering has born the ultimate result. Then, will be the time to call us all into account, whether we are still alive on the last day of all, or whether we wait in some realm of the departed."

They watched the increasing light of the comet following the sunrise. It turned the golden light into something ominous. Leah shivered again.

"You're cold - get into bed and cover yourself with the blankets."

"You as well - you said you would sleep."

"I can't sleep - not with that - thing - just out of sight, I have the fanciful feeling that it's waiting to pounce on us!"

"Do you want to see it? Perhaps we could take a shuttle and fly high."

"We!?"

"You wouldn't expect me to stay behind?"

"I wish you'd start behaving like a woman who's on the brink of giving birth!"

"I don't think I've ever met such an anxious father!"

"Of course I'm anxious! Now tell me that you wished I was indifferent!"

"You're an argumentative man!"

"You're a stubborn woman - but I love you with such an intensity, it hurts!"

They lay in each other's arms for a while, looking to the increasing light.

"You didn't answer me, Michael - Would you like to see what it looks like?"

He shook his head.

"I think I'm content to let it stay out of sight until it's ready to make an appearance. I suspect, when it does come into view, that we won't be able to wait until it's gone again and has taken its influence with it."

"How soon do you think, before it has passed."

"I asked Saul that. He couldn't say for certain. Much will depend on readings they will be taking as it approaches. From what he says, it's coming in very fast. He told me that comets pick up speed as they near the Sun."

"I can't understand why it wasn't spotted earlier."

"I suppose, because we've grown used to not looking outward towards the stars during the Time of Peace. We learned to look to the Earth and the wonders which were being performed on it. The Kingdom was so wonderful, that we had no hankering to visit other planets - in any case, we knew that they were barren. Saul made the point, it was only when they were working out the trajectories for the Suborbiter System, that someone noticed this fast moving blip of light and started watching its progress."

Leah moved uneasily and then, after a moment moved again. She

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looked at Michael and forced a smile.

"I don't know about the comet, but I think junior has just decided it's time to make an appearance!"

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It was towards noon on the same day, and Michael sat alone in his study, to which he had been banished as soon as the midwives had taken command of the situation. They had been very firm, very polite, but he had been bundled away from the Leah despite his protests. He was informed that she needed no distractions, it was time for rest and not for idle chatter. Everything was proceeding as well as it should and he would be informed in adequate time, when the birth was imminent.

The implication was, that surely he had something better to do in the present circumstances of crisis, than to sit by the side of his wife and hold her hand. Michael looked at the sheaf of communiqués he had been handed an hour earlier and realised he hadn't absorbed much of their contents. They all seemed to tell him the same thing. In a great and tightening circle around the Judaeon highlands and Jerusalem, the forces of Gog were moving slowly forward. They were carrying the battle to the defenders, in small patrols which were probing their strength and their will.

The Syrian and Arabian lines were being forced back by relentless pressure. Michael's forces, strung out in a long, thin line, were retreating into the mountains which protected the valley of the Jordan. Gubkin's patrols were testing the strength of the defences below Mount Carmel and easing forward, so that they occupied the lower ground. Only in the Vale of Esdraelon, was there no significant movement. The invaders and defenders maintained a tense watchfulness. There was a flurry of activity around the small villa which had been identified as Malenski's headquarters. The early arrival and departure of Gubkin had been noted and reported. Gog's other captains came and went. Georgi was doing a great deal of talking, but there was little action.

Michael put the communiqués down and looked at the door. It remained closed, his hand hovered over the control pad and retreated again. He desperately wanted an update of what was happening to his own wife in his own house, but he was better informed about the situation on the battle fronts! He knew he was acting like the typical expectant father, but he felt powerless to control his anxiety. He disciplined himself not to summon Luke and not to send him like a petitioner to the door of the Leah's room.

He reread another communiqué. This one was from Simon in Gazera. He longed to talk to his old friend face to face, if only for a little moral support - although, come to think of it, Simon would have been more likely to have laughed in his face about his anxiety. The holo system was defunct. It was a casualty of the extreme climatic changes and neglected maintenance, coupled with failing power supplies. Simon's message had been full of the description of the approaching comet, which he had seen from his shuttle when trying to visit Ambrose Suosin. The communiqué was laced with the

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tension Simon was experiencing and the panic which was growing in the population.

Michael felt his own impotence. He was unable to do nothing to help the men he had placed in charge in their various stewardships. If he was truthful to himself, he had almost forgotten their existence. His preoccupation had been with the movements of Malenski and his forces and the encroaching ring of the confederation he had formed to relentlessly surround the Camp of the Saints.

It was very quiet in the solitude of his office. It seemed lit with a greater intensity. The halo of light from the approaching comet had grown, almost as if it was keeping pace with the movement of the sun across the sky. Michael corrected himself. The comet brought it home that it was the Earth which moved in relation to the sun - and this also applied to the comet. The planet was slowly turning itself to face the visitor. It was like the movement of scenery in a theatrical production.

Michael wasn't sure if he fell into a daydream, or even if he fell asleep and experienced a nightmare - or even if he had been shown a vision. The reality of the office merged into something else - something vastly different. He was the onlooker, a witness - but he was also a participant - or so it seemed. He couldn't be sure, for the figure he sometimes identified to be himself, at other times, took on a different identity. He was conscious of movement - of a great deal of motion by vast numbers. He was sometimes a part of it - at other times, he stood aside and watched. He wasn't sure in his own mind whether the motion was connected with men, or whether they were spirits - or even if they were angels.

The whole scene was brilliantly illuminated, so much so, that his eyes could hardly register what was taking place. Those who moved from place to place, from right to left, or back and forth, across his vision, appeared and disappeared into the intense light, to emerge again from another direction. He saw a figure he recognised, but it was enlarged, almost gross, a grim caricature of Georgi Malenski, and yet, it wasn't him - it embodied evil and the features were distorted into a satanic grimace. He sensed that the scene represented the preparation for something. The actual event was close, but it was not yet to happen - and then, he was back again in the reality of his office, his eyes blinking to clear them of tears of protest at gazing into the pearl grey outside glare.

He shook his head to clear it. Whatever it was that he had witnessed, remained clear in his mind. He had been shown something which he couldn't comprehend. His hand moved automatically over the control pad. Luke appeared promptly, he shook his head as he entered and grinned ruefully.

"I don't know where Leah recruited those women, Michael, but I wish they were amongst our captains! They frighten the life out of me - I don't know what they would do to the enemy!"

Michael forced a smile.

"Gog and his Horde won't be frightened away, Luke - even if we had an army of midwives! These reports are several hours old - is there still no change?"

Luke shook his head.

"I would have told you if there had been, Michael!"

"I know that, Luke! I wasn't making a criticism. I am interested in what our observers have to say about the morale in Gog's encampment. You can

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learn a lot sometimes by watching the way men circulate - especially when they're waiting for orders which never seem to come. Wouldn't you think, that by now, some might be asking questions about why they have been planted down in alien territory, surrounded on three sides by a ring of defenders on higher ground, with the sea at their backs - and yet, their commander hasn't given the order to advance or to retreat. He is sitting there waiting for something - and they don't know why he is waiting - I would have thought there would be signs of restlessness."

Luke relaxed and perched himself on the corner of the desk. He nodded.

"You're right! Morale could be quite a big question mark and one which Gog will have to address if he wants to keep control over that rabble."

"His captains will be pressing him for decisions - and they aren't forthcoming. Captains being captains, they will be tempted to take the law into their own hands - Gog or no Gog! I'm sure they hold him in a great deal of superstitious awe, but someone is going to be a little less awe stricken than the next man and is going to remember that Georgi is not a military genius, but a capable Administrator who has ideas above his station in life!"

"What does this tell us, Michael?"

"It tells us that we have to redouble our watchfulness, especially if we face trigger happy captains trying to win honour and glory on their own account. It also tells us that Georgi will be forced to make a move before he's very much older!"

Luke nodded thoughtfully.

"A strange expression you used - trigger happy - "

"An old fashioned idiom from before the time of the Great Destruction. It referred to the fiendish weapons they had in those days, which ejected a projectile at high speed and with explosive results. We can be eternally thankful that this was one of the branches of knowledge which was first of all outlawed and then lost for ever during the Kingdom of Peace. Just imagine if we were faced with such weapons today. Swords, spears, bows and arrows - they're vicious enough. Be thankful we couldn't forge our ploughshares into projectile launchers!"

"Given time, I suppose the ways and means could be rediscovered."

"Thankfully, we weren't given enough time - and I doubt if we ever will be!"

"I'll issue the instructions to double our watchfulness!"

"Don't let it sound like a criticism, Luke - some are becoming very touchy!"

Luke had the good grace to blush a little, as he left.

The room was silent again. Michael was restless to the point of being explosive. He sprang to his feet and marched to the window. The outside light was harsh, sending the landscape into sharp relief, as if the house and garden was bathed in an arc light. He felt as if he was under inspection, unable to hide even his thoughts. Quite suddenly, he wondered where the Firstlings were. It was the return of a thought which had recurred with increasing frequency, as the circumstances had changed to bring Gog to his doorstep.

He acknowledged the fact that the teaching task of the Kings and Priests was at an end. They had been commissioned to rule and reign with

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Jesus Christ for a thousand years, that too, was at an end. Scripture had virtually nothing to say about their activities after the end of the thousand years. One thing was certain, they had not stepped down from the high status to which they had been awarded for their faithfulness in following the Lamb wither so ever He had led them. They remained the Lord's Bride for all Eternity - but their immediate task for the thousand years, had come to an end. The questions remained. Where were they now? What part did they have to play in the events which were soon to unfold in the Vale of Esdraelon?

Michael would have given a great deal to have felt their comforting presence to support him in this, his greatest test - but perhaps, it would not have been a test, if they had been there to offer their comfort and strength. Perhaps, it was essential for him to perform his task alone. Only in that way, would he prove himself before his Father. Spontaneously, he fell to his knees and projected himself into the presence of the Father. No words came to his lips or even into his thoughts, his petitions were beyond words.

He felt totally alone, there was no sense of responding warmth to acknowledge that he had been accepted as a petitioner. The questions came into his mind before he could prevent them: 'Father have you abandoned me? Will you leave me alone to face what is to come? I can't do it without you. All, O Lord, art thou!'

In those moments, he understood something of the feelings of another petitioner, who had knelt in a garden not so very far away from the villa. He had wrestled with Himself until the sweat had fallen like blood. The angels had come eventually to minister unto Him. Like him too, Michael felt a sudden support and the sure knowledge that he was not abandoned.

Shortly before sunset, two significant events took place. The first, was that Leah gave birth to Michael ben Levi's son - and the second, was the appearance of the comet, low over the south-eastern horizon. The news of both was brought to Michael by Luke Belin. Michael's priorities were automatic. He raced along the corridors leading to Leah's room and thrust open the door. This time, he wasn't repelled by a determined phalanx of militant matrons, instead, they were wreathed in smiles and congratulations and parted to reveal the radiant picture of a very tired but joyful Leah, who held her new son to her breast.

Michael stopped abruptly, just inside the door and the smiling ladies trooped out and closed it behind them. He was mildly surprised to find that he was shaking.

Aren't you going to come and see what we've made, Michael?"

Somehow, his legs responded and he moved to the bedside in a kind of trance. Leah held the child out to him and automatically he took squirming bundle. Strange noises emitted from the exposed end of it and he looked down into a small, red, contorted face, whose lips searched for nourishment. Leah leaned back on the pillows and gave a tremulous laugh.

"You look so awkward, my darling! Well, what do you make of your son?"

It seemed that so much depended on the answer he was expected to give. The normally articulate Administrator of the Central District - the mighty Prince of the Covenant - groped for the right words.

"He's - wonderful - a miracle!"

He looked at her quickly, tears of happiness flowed unchecked. He

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was crying too - he hadn't realised it until some of the drops wetted the child's face. There were a few grunts of protest. He handed his son back and knelt by the bed. He leaned over and kissed his wife gently and the child between them wailed at the pressure being exerted on him. Michael jerked back.

"Did I hurt him?"

Leah shook her head.

"He's tough - like his father - he's also hungry."

Michael watched as if he had never seen the function before, as Leah placed the child to the breast. He could think of no other occasion in his life, when he had felt so happy - or so fulfilled. Leah watched him above the busy head of their child. She was practically bursting with the welling up of love and gratitude that she had pleased him so much. Michael looked like a child who had been given a new and wonderful toy - a precious gift. She said a silent prayer that the moments of wonder they were sharing would never come to an end. Even as she expressed the thought, she felt the surge of the old tensions returning. For the previous twelve hours, she had been concentrating on the one thing that mattered, bringing her child into the world - but in that time, events had moved on. The world and its events had not stopped. Gog and his Horde still threatened the Camp of the Saints and Michael still had to contend with the implications.

"What's happened, Michael - whilst I was busy?"

"Don't worry yourself about that, my darling - just take care of our son!"

"Can you see the comet yet?"

"Luke tells me that we can."

"You haven't looked!?"

"I had something more interesting to do - paying a visit to my wife and our new son!"

"Tell me what it looks like."

"Leah! It isn't important!"

"Please, Michael! - Either that, or I'll get out of this bed and take a look for myself!"

"Don't you dare even to imagine doing it!"

"You can see from here."

"Did I ever tell you that you're the most stubborn woman I've ever met?"

"Practically every time we have a conversation! I sometimes wonder if you lived a very sheltered life!"

"All right! - All right! I'll look, if only to keep you quiet."

"Is that any way to talk to a woman who's recovering from childbirth?"

"Probably not - but then, I've lived a very sheltered life and I haven't had any experience of dealing with stubborn women recovering from childbirth!"

He walked over to the window and drew back the heavy curtains. The room was flooded with the light of the setting sun, but more dominant, was the lurid, pearl grey light of the comet. He stared out at the south eastern horizon and was, for a moment, speechless. Leah looked at the grey light sending the face of her husband into stark, severe lines and shivered. She held her child more protectively and he grunted in protest.

"It's just clear of the Mountains of Moab - just above the crest of the range. I suppose we're seeing it head on. It's shedding a lot of light, like a halo all around it and that's what we've been seeing - in the centre is a hard,

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tiny disk. It looks so insignificant. It hardly seems possible that it could cause as much damage as Saul suggested. It's quite awe inspiring - I think it will begin to look terrifying when it draws nearer."

Leah responded in a small voice.

"We know what it is - and it sends shivers down our spines - just imagine what it's doing for simple, superstitious men, living in the fields, with nothing to protect them but thin canvas walls and roof. Think what it's doing for Gog's Horde, who have been expecting some sort of visitation. I suspect that Georgi and his captains will be having quite a lot of trouble keeping a lid on the unrest."

The advent of the horrible star was a fascination for Malenski. He had realised that its appearance was imminent and had stood with his back against the eastern facing wall of his villa, watching the south eastern sky, where it seemed, the halo of light was at its most intense. He had stood there for hours, well aware that his captains were watching and that the word of what he was doing, was circulating through the camp like a wild fire. No one came near him. He was now a figure to be dreaded rather than revered. His followers were too frightened to take any action which might be construed as defiance - or even to question. They waited with him - they didn't know for what, but the suggestions and propositions of what the future might hold, were all pessimistic.

When the comet had finally emerged from behind a peak in Moab and stood clear in the darkening sky. Malenski stared at it with something akin to hunger. His mouth stretched into a wide, humourless smile, which in reality was little more than a snarl. He looked like an animal faced with an unknown enemy and not knowing the appropriate response. It was quite true, he didn't know the response suitable for this unexpected manifestation, but he knew with a grim certainty that it would be an important factor in the events which would take place under the shadow of Megiddo.

His captains almost crept in the direction of the villa, some hours later. He was still standing where he had been during the hours of the afternoon. When he saw them approaching, he seemed to jerk back into reality and turned, preceding them into the briefing room. They nodded a greeting and shuffled into an untidy semicircle around him. He looked from one to the other and there were few who chose to hold his gaze for more than a few seconds.

"What have you to tell me, brother captains."

There was a moment of awkward silence. One blurted out an answer for them all.

"The men are very uneasy - about the light in the sky, brother Georgi."

Malenski looked at him and the tight smile returned.

"From this point on, you will call me the name you have whispered between yourselves. I am no longer Georgi Malenski - from this time onward, I am the Lord Gog! Is that understood!?"

There was a determined effort not to exchange glances. The one who had acted as the spokesman nodded.

"If you say so, my Lord Gog."

"I do say so! Now tell me, why are the men so uneasy about the light in the sky?"

"They don't understand what it is - and we can't explain it to them."

Gog waited for more, nothing was forthcoming.

"You are educated men - I'm quite certain you have heard of comets.

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The light in the sky is a comet. What is there about a comet to cause our men uneasiness?"

Another of the captains took courage.

"Most of the men are superstitious fools - er - Lord Gog. They see it as an omen - and they're frightened it means we will be defeated when we join battle."

Gog nodded sarcastically.

"An omen! Tell me, have we ever been defeated? Answer this - are the enemy stronger than us, or weaker? How can this comet change the course of a battle, when we have a stronger army and have more tricks up our sleeve than our friend Michael ben Levi and his rabble of ill trained militia!?"

His captains began to look a little more cheerful. They exchanged glances. Another said.

"Some of the men were watching you looking at this - comet, Lord Gog."

Gog turned to him and the smile tightened to nothing.

"It is my responsibility to assess everything - I wanted to see this comet - to form my conclusions. I have done so - I have told you that we have nothing to fear - you can go back to the frightened old women you call an army and tell them that Gog has faced the comet and sees nothing to make his knees turn to water. Tell them this as well. Tomorrow, we make our final preparations. In the evening, we will form our battle plan - and in the following dawn, we march against the toy soldiers which stand between us and Jerusalem!"

49.

Late in the afternoon of the following day, Michael unexpectedly organised the evacuation of the villa to Jerusalem. He avoided giving a direct answer to the simple question: Why? He had left it as late as possible and fussed around Leah and his son until she laughed in protest.

"I won't break in half, Michael and the baby is wrapped up in a cocoon of blankets. The other children think it's a great adventure. So you can concentrate on whatever deep laid plan you've devised, which makes it imperative for us to abandon our home."

"We're not abandoning our home, Leah - but I have a good reason."

"Which you refuse to tell anyone! I've asked Luke and he doesn't know - and he also tells me that we're under no threat from any direction and that nothing has changed!"

"Luke talks too much!"

"And you talk too little! Do you have any idea of the upheaval you're causing? It's no small thing to move an entire household of people at three hours notice!"

"I'll remember that next time and make it four hours!"

Before he joined her in the Shuttle which would take them to the city, he glanced once again at the approaching comet. It was now quite high in the sky and had assumed a fearsome aspect. Behind the hard, white ball of the

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nucleus and its glaring halo, was an immense spume of trailing material, which stretched far beyond the south-eastern horizon. The light was garishly white, bathing the entire landscape in a peculiar colourless contrast. The spectrum had vanished, everything was a shade of grey. Leah followed his gaze and murmured.

"It won't get dark tonight - almost like it was when the moon was full during the years of the Kingdom - "

"That light was beautiful, silvery, ethereal - this thing illuminates a nightmare!"

He sat down beside her and nodded to the pilot to take them the short distance to the city.

"I can't understand why we didn't use the large Pod - one extra, very small little person wouldn't have caused overcrowding."

Michael made his voice as light as possible.

"Didn't I tell you? The Pod System has finally given up the ghost. There's so much disruption to the network that the computer has finally abandoned any attempts to route traffic - it became downright dangerous to use it. We had a number of accidents - with Pods crashing into each other, so I decided to suspend operations."

"Another casualty of Gog and his mindless Horde. I've seen some of the reports. It would appear that they smash anything they don't understand, or which they resent. I imagine they see it as some sort of justifiable revenge on society."

"The mob has always been mindless, Leah - but you're right, their instinctive reaction on those who still have comfort, is to make sure they destroy it."

They had lifted above the hills between the villa and Jerusalem. Behind them, the white wasteland of the Salt Sea, was a harsh, shimmering plain which hurt the eyes. There was no traffic rising from the Terminus, Leah looked at her husband in question.

"I've also suspended Suborbiter flights until the comet and its trail of debris has passed. Saul tells me, it's in line with a global decision."

Leah digested the information.

"So we really are cut off from all outside help."

He looked sideways at her.

"I'm surprised you had hopes of someone coming to our assistance - Joshua for instance! I'm afraid that he's fighting a losing battle in Iberia. The Scandians have crossed the Pyrenees and he's fighting them every metre of the way southward."

She shook her head.

"What a mess - poor Joshua - "

"Poor everyone! Every report we receive tells the same story. Uprisings, pillage, rape, massacres - "

"The final battle, Michael."

"The next few days will see an end of it!"

She looked at his profile so close to her. His jaw was set in a grim line and quite suddenly, she felt a chill of apprehension.

She was surprised when the pilot set them down close to her small house. It could hardly be described as being near to the Administration Centre. She hadn't been home since the death of Elena. She felt the poignancy of it, as she stepped out of the shuttle, carrying her new-born child

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in her arms. She was relieved of the burden by an insistent nurse and Michael took her by the arm and escorted her inside. The other children trooped in excitedly - all excepting Piotr, who suddenly looked lost and alone. Leah noticed it and checked Michael. She stooped down and took the boy in her arms.

"You were happy here, Piotr - do you remember - and we're going to be happy again. I hoped you would help me to get everyone into the right rooms. Can you do that?"

The boy brightened up and nodded. Leah let Michael escort her firmly to her bedroom and didn't protest when he sat her on the bed. She smiled wearily.

"I'm not arguing with you, Michael."

"It would be about the first time!"

"That was uncalled for! I can't think where everyone is going to fit in this little place."

"You always said we had too much room in the hills."

"Are you going to tell me why we've uprooted ourselves? I feel like a refugee. There hasn't been a break through in our defences has there?"

He shook his head.

"Well - what then!?"

"I can see you aren't going to give me any peace until I tell you."

"Correct!"

"Very well - I'm expecting some sort of disturbance when the comet passes."

"Disturbance! What sort of disturbance? I thought it was practically passed - it's right above us and it looks as if Saul's pessimistic suggestion that it was going to hit, isn't about to happen."

"You are forgetting what he had to say about the tail - it won't pass for several days."

"You still didn't say what sort of disturbance."

"It depends on what hits us - and Saul insists that the Earth is going to pass right through the tail!"

"Why is Jerusalem safer than the villa?"

Michael hesitated then he shrugged.

"If you must know - the Book of Zechariah!"

"Not another prophesy, Michael!"

"Have they ever let us down?"

She shook her head. He crossed to a computer outlet and entered the co-ordinates. They waited until the text was scrolled on to the screen.

"On that day his feet will stand on the Mount of Olives, which is opposite Jerusalem to the east, and the mountains shall be cleft in two by an immense valley running east and west; half the mountain shall move northwards and half southwards. The valley between the hills shall be blocked, for the new valley between them shall reach as far as Asal. Blocked it shall be as it was blocked in the time of Uzziah king of Judah, and the Lord my God will appear with all the holy ones. On that day there shall be neither heat nor cold nor frost. It shall be all one day, whose coming is known only to the Lord, without distinction of day or night, and at evening-time there shall be light.

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She stared at it without comprehension.

"I don't understand, Michael - who does it refer to - whose feet?"

"This text talks of a great earthquake which took place in the time of Uzziah - he was the leper king of Israel - You ask who it is who will stand with his feet on the Mount of Olives - can there be any doubt that it is some heavenly being, who will come to our aid when the city is surrounded by our enemies? The effect of him bracing his feet on the Mount of Olives, will be the same as an earthquake. I'll show you something else - It's from the fourth book of Ezra."

He entered new co-ordinates. Once again, the text was scrolled on the screen.

'Behold a terrible vision, and appearance thereof from the east. The nations of the dragon and the Arabs shall come out with many chariots, and shall be carried as the wind upon earth, and all they which hear them shall fear and tremble. Also the Carmanians raging in wrath shall go forth as the wild boars of the wood, and with great power shall they come, and join battle with them, and shall waste a portion of the land of the Assyrians. And after them shall the dragon have the upper hand and, remembering their birth, shall turn, and form a powerful alliance, to persecute them. Then these shall be frightened and silenced by their might, and shall flee. And from the land of the Assyrians shall the enemy besiege them, and consume some of them, and in their host shall be fear and dread, and strife among their kings.

Behold, clouds come from the east and from the north unto the south, and they are very horrible to look upon, full of wrath and storm. And they shall collide and smite against each other, a great multitude of stars upon the earth, and blood from the sword shall reach unto the belly, and dung from men unto the camel's hump.

In short, great fear and trembling shall be on earth, and they that shall see the wrath shall be alarmed and terrified. And then shall there come great rainstorms from the south, and from the north, and another part from the west. And the east winds shall gain the upper hand and encompass it and also the cloud which his wrath hath raised up; and the stars shall be stirred to cause fear towards the east and the west. And there shall arise great and thick clouds full of wrath, and also a star, that they terrify all the earth and them that dwell therein. And they shall pour out over every high and eminent place a horrible star, fire, and hail, and flying swords, and many waters, that all the fields and rivers shall be flooded from the multitude of the waters. And they shall break down the cities and walls, and mountains and hills, trees of the wood, and grass of the field'

He turned to her and watched the expressions come and go on her face.

"I didn't show you that to frighten you, my darling!"

He knelt by the bed and kissed her hand.

"I'm frightened for the children, Michael, not for myself - how can anyone survive?"

"I moved us here so that we can survive. Jerusalem will be safe, despite an earthquake which will split the Mount of Olives in two. We can't be

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sure about the villa - in any case, the access to the east from the city might be cut. Of one thing I am absolutely sure. Jerusalem will remain and it will stand clear and visible when everything else has been thrown down, because it is a symbol of the Camp of the Saints!"

On the Plain of Esdraelon, Gog watched the comet's progress from the horizon. It fascinated him, he was unable to remain within the seclusion of the room he had made his Command Post. Even during the previous night, as soon as he had dismissed his captains, he had taken his bedroll and laid it out under the stars he could no longer see. The light of the comet's halo was so bright, it swamped the lesser lights and even the rising moon was somehow submerged in its relentless, lurid glare. He surmised, that in daylight, it might even challenge the light of the sun.

That was how he saw it - a challenge. From his vantage point, the comet's track would be right over his head and its tail would follow. It was coming directly for him and his army - a challenge to Gog and his Horde. His lips twisted into a mirthless grin when he remembered how subdued his captains had become when, at long last, he had declared himself to be the one whose name they had whispered even when he was crossing the freezing plains of Siberia. The grin faded - they had crept away from him and he had read the fear in their eyes. They were frightened of him! Frightened of where he might lead them! Frightened that he would consign them to the hell he had earned for himself!

He glared at the comet with rising fury, oblivious of the stares of his captains who kept a respectful distance from the maniac who dared to see himself as the master of the world. Gog knew that he wasn't insane, he wasn't a raving imbecile who would take rash action. Everything would be well planned and co-ordinated - such precision, after all, was his trade mark. The characteristic by which he was known. They did not need to fear that he would lead them into some untenable position. He was quite confident that he had the numbers and the strength to sweep aside Michael ben Levi and his puny little army of half trained farmers, and take the prize of all prizes - Jerusalem!

If he had hesitated to think of doing so in the past, he no longer had any reservations. If he had thought of waiting for whatever disaster was supposed to overwhelm him on the Plain of Esdraelon - he waited no longer - and neither did he fear this nebulous threat which was completely without substance. The comet enraged him! He raised his fist to it! He would make his move before it could unleash what it brought with it. He would turn it into a sign of his triumph. It would blaze in the sky above Jerusalem and be the indication of his mastery and the final overthrow of the Kingdom which had lasted a mere thousand years - His - Gog's - would last for ever!

There were more rational moments, when his thoughts became calmer and then, the earlier fear and awe returned. He would look around him nervously. Knowing that the mountains on each side of the plain, were filled with silent watchers, who waited to see what Gog would do. In those moments, he hated these lower lands - this Plain of Esdraelon with the looming heights of Megiddo constantly reminding him of the name of the battle he would fight against Michael the great Prince, who would stand up for his people - The Battle of Armageddon, surely the most famous of battles - famous even before it was fought. A voice whispered in his mind - 'and one whose result is known!'

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Late in the afternoon, he called his captains to him - even Gubkin who waited on the far side of Carmel and those who waited in the mountains beyond the Jordan valley. The sun had nearly set over the Great Sea, before they could all assemble. He looked at them, one after the other and knew that his pronouncement had circulated with the speed of a wild fire. Once again, he read fear, curiosity - even satisfaction that he had come out into the open at last. He remembered the Scandians, who had once stood with these men - and wondered what they would have made of it - and Sedova - his face hardened into a mask of hatred.

"You know why we have come together, brother captains - we are not here to exchange social niceties - but I promise you a great party when we finally put our feet under Michael ben Levi's table! Tomorrow, we make our move - tonight, we make our final plans."

Gubkin gestured with his hand. Gog stared at him impatiently.

"Well, Gubkin? What problems do you foresee so early in our briefing?"

The tone was heavy with sarcasm. Gubkin blinked and hastily adjusted his approach.

"A preliminary point - my Lord Gog - our plans must take into account that we will not have the element of surprise. Whatever we do, will be known to the enemy before we have a chance to get our men moving."

Gog stared at him relentlessly.

"We do not need the element of surprise - Gog's army is invincible - What extra proof do you need, Gubkin - we are here!? We do not need darkness, nor do we need to move in before the dawn - the element of surprise is for normal armies - You are Gog's Horde - you have the might and the power to sweep away all that stands in your path!"

One of the other captains was brave enough to venture.

"We will take heavy casualties, Lord Gog."

Gog's glare was ferocious.

"Casualties! You talk of casualties? I tell you this - not one man will fall - I guarantee it! The enemy will see us advance and they will run like scared rabbits! They will throw down their weapons and throw aside their shields and they will howl and scream in their mad fear. They won't stop running until they find themselves back in Jerusalem and clinging on to the knees of Michael ben Levi - and even there, they will not be safe, for Gog and his invincible army will pursue them and slaughter them to the last man!"

His captains looked one to the other.

"You think I don't see your looks!? You dare to doubt me!?"

Gubkin stepped forward.

"Not so, Lord Gog - we are - er - moved by your stirring words - and anxious to know your plans for tomorrow."

Gog stared at him and his lip curled in contempt. Gubkin's gaze didn't waver. Gog nodded.

"We shall see, Gubkin! Very well - let us see what our brave soldiers will face tomorrow."

During the next four hours, they went through every detail of the plans their Commander had constructed. At the end, even Gubkin had to concede that they had every chance of success. Georgi Malenski might well have become mentally unbalanced, but his strategy was faultless. On the surface, there was no reason to doubt that they would be in Jerusalem within two

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days. The other captains also seemed satisfied. Gog dismissed them. For the duration of the briefing, the manic responses had been carefully subdued. He had listened to suggestions and had even accepted them when they had appeared warranted. He was like a different man to the one who had greeted them. Gubkin lingered, he had decided to take a gamble that the more reasonable man would prevail for a while longer. He had no idea why Malenski was experiencing such drastic changes of personality, but he had a sneaking feeling that it had a great deal to do with the advent of the comet.

"There was something else, Nicholai?"

The question was almost mild - and the use of the familiar name was encouraging.

"When we reach Jerusalem - what are your intentions for the population?"

Malenski eyed him steadily.

"My intentions are that they shall be treated in no way different to any other city which has resisted and has finally fallen to our forces."

Gubkin hesitated.

"Do you want a repeat of what happened in Nile City?"

Malenski smiled slightly.

"We have got rid of the wilder elements in our armies, Nicholai."

"Not altogether, Georgi! We still have ruthless men who see it as their right to rape and pillage."

"So, what do you suggest I do on the eve of a critical battle, tell them that they must behave themselves and that they can expect to have their wrists slapped if they step out of line?"

"Tell them that Gog wants the city untouched - it is his special place and it must not be spoiled."

A touch of the other man became visible in Malenski's face.

"Why would Gog concern himself with Jerusalem in particular. Do you imagine I will stay here once we've conquered it? Perhaps, the best thing will be to bring Jerusalem down to size - Michael ben Levi once described it as a small village, with a water supply to match - let it become a small village! I will not elevate its importance by making it my capital - let it sink into oblivion!"

Gubkin considered him for a moment. He knew he had to be very careful.

"Very well, Georgi. I will give the orders that there are to be no privileges, even if they capture Michael ben Levi and his family."

He thought he had overstepped the mark. Malenski looked as if he was about to erupt into the raging tyrant he had been earlier.

"What do I care about, Michael ben Levi - or his family - they can do with them as they wish!"

Gubkin licked his lips.

"Does that include - Piotr?"

The fire subsided out of Malenski's eyes, he sagged down into a chair, buried his face in his hands, and wept.

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The battle raged all around him, but it seemed that as soon as one of the combatants fell to the ground, mortally wounded, another took his place and the titanic struggle continued. Michael was confronted with only one adversary - an elusive, slippery customer, who seemed able to avoid the most telling thrust. They were armed with the short swords which had been beaten out of sickles. They thrust and parried and the blades slipped past each one as they side stepped the blows. The blood sang in Michael's ears, he experienced a peculiar sense of exhilaration and yet, he knew that one false step would spell the end for himself or for the other.

The battleground was shrouded in a haze of light and noise. There were death cries, together with the hoarse screams of men who had taken a thrust which had not killed them. Michael concentrated on his adversary. He had suddenly changed tactics, retreating a little, as if to lure Michael forward. The Prince of the Covenant eyed him warily. Gog lunged forward and nearly caught him with the surprise move. This time, Michael connected with his sword and sliced what should have been a mortal blow, but there was no blood and Gog smiled slowly, a derisive, confident sneer, which told Michael that there would be no easy outcome to their combat.

The light around them intensified, so that it was impossible to see the other combatants. Michael watched, crouched and wary, conscious suddenly of an intense cold and extreme tiredness. He became so exhausted, that he nearly collapsed. It took an extreme effort of will to remain upright and alert to a renewed attack. A belch of fire emitted from the billowing haze in front of him and immediately, it parted and he was faced with a reptilian creature, whose tail lashed from side to side. Incredibly, it held a long sword in one of its claws.

It was an impossibility, no such creature existed, and yet, it confronted him. It also spoke, rasping, subhuman, but it was recognisable. The voice was that of Georgi Malenski!

"We come to the final meeting, Michael - one of us is destined to leave this field of battle as the victor - the other will surely perish!"

Michael did not respond. The representation before him was a the product of a nightmare. A dragon - perhaps, THE dragon of Revelation. It advanced towards him and he was enveloped in choking, sulphurous smoke and flame. Michael stepped aside and thrust out blindly with his sword. It connected and he heard a scream of pain. Quite suddenly he was thrown down heavily. He struggled to rise and could not, he was pinned by the reptilian tail. He was conscious of the battle raging around him, its noise and conflict echoed and re-echoed in a bedlam of sound.

A well known face loomed over him, it was confident, the gleam of victory in its eyes - almost at his throat was a sword. It was poised, ready for the death lunge and Michael accepted that he had lost the last fight, with a grim fatalism, he was quiet, prepared for death. From within him came a voice he hardly recognised, but it was his own.

"Michael does not die in this battle. Michael gains the victory and Gog will be vanquished!"

The sword wavered a little and the confident sneer was gone. Michael found a reserve of strength he hardly knew he possessed, which he channelled into an upward thrust with his knees. He caught his adversary off guard. The positions were reversed. Somehow, he had recovered his sword

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and he held it in his right hand and he wrestled to bring it to bear on the breast of the writhing figure he was trying to pin to the ground. Georgi Malenski glared up at him - free of the dragon form and even that of the monster he had become - this was the original Georgi Malenski - the Jonathan to his David. There was a pleading in the man's face, but Michael could not allow the element of pity to take hold within him. He wrestled with increased ferocity and slowly brought his weapon to the critical position. The panting man screamed into his ear.

"For God's sake, Michael - stop!"

Michael applied more pressure and there were other hands on him, hands which tore him apart from Gog, his adversary. Michael wrestled like a madman, this battle could not be inconclusive. The death of Gog must not be prevented!

"Come to you senses, man! Don't just stand there - Sit on him!"

The cry was plaintive - it also didn't sound like Georgi Malenski! The haze of battle faded, although there was a noise of another kind. Michael became conscious that he was wet. It puzzled him, he had not been aware that he had taken serious wounds, but if he was soaked in his life blood, then, so be it. He was being roughly shaken and he jerked open his eyes in protest. It took some time for them to focus. When they did, he found himself glaring into the face of Luke Belin. A little further down his torso, Eli Benjamin was sitting on his chest. They both looked as if they had been trampled on by a herd of wild horses.

"What happened?"

"You might well ask! Perhaps you could tell us!"

Michael looked around.

"What's that noise?"

"Wind and rain - Is it safe for us to get off you?"

"It would be more comfortable!"

"What happened to you?"

"Call it a bad dream!"

"Do you have them often? - I feel sorry for Leah!"

"It's a long story - but I was fighting Georgi Malenski - amongst others!"

"Most of the time you were fighting us - I have the bruises to prove it!"

Michael took Eli's hand and was hauled to his feet. He walked to the entrance to the stone hut, which had been commandeered for his command post. He found the reason for his wet condition, a stream of water was flowing in through the door. The hut was high on the plateau of Megiddo and facing the camp of the invaders, which was now hidden from them by sheets of torrential rain. Michael looked upward, the light of the comet rolled eerily around the sky, great billowing clouds were surging in from every direction and the wind was so strong that it almost sucked him from the door of the shelter. The structure shook with its impact. Michael felt a chill race up his spine.

"It is beginning - the final scenario - just as Ezra foretold:

'Behold, clouds come from the east and from the north unto the south, and they are very horrible to look upon, full of wrath and storm. And they shall collide and smite against each other, a great multitude of stars upon the earth, and blood from the sword shall reach unto the belly, and dung from

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men unto the camel's hump."

Luke and Eli joined him at the door. Luke growled.

"I wouldn't like to imagine what it will be like down in the plain."

"Is this what Saul meant when he said that the comet's passing would cause a trail of damage?"

Eli nodded.

"The Earth will be passing through the tail by now - this is only the beginning!"

Michael shuddered, the air had become bitterly cold and the clouds above them surged and rolled as if they were in torment. Quite suddenly, it started to hail - at first, small pellets which quickly clad the bare rocks of the hilltop - and then, like the blows of a hammer, the pieces became larger, hurling out of the sky as if they had been propelled by a hand of fury. They assumed the size of small rocks and pounded against the stone shelter. Michael turned to his captains and shouted:

"Are our men under shelter?"

They nodded, Luke's answer was almost inaudible.

"Saul warned the captains - and if they had any sense, they took notice."

"May God help those who are caught out in this!"

They retreated away from the door. Michael found them staring at him solemnly. Eli broke the silence.

"This is really the last battle, Michael?"

Michael forced a smile.

"You will find yourselves redundant, Eli - you and your fellow captains - and all your men. Armageddon is upon us - and there is worse to come."

Without warning, the earth shuddered beneath them and the stone structure heaved, shook and seemed to writhe and twist - but it didn't fall. They were smothered in small debris and dust and nearly choked in its cloud. The shuddering continued for some time but not with the same intensity. The noise of the hail had stopped. Eli peered out cautiously.

"I must try to reach my men."

Michael nodded.

"Watch your step - I don't want it said that the only casualties we took, was one man with a sprained ankle!"

Eli managed a grin and was gone. Michael turned to Luke.

"I'm worried sick about Leah!"

His aide nodded solemnly.

"One thing is for sure - by now, she knows her husband has slipped away without telling her! I wouldn't worry, Michael - God will look after His own!"

"The earthquake would have been centred on the Mount of Olives."

"Since when have you been a seismologist?"

"Since I read the prophesies of Zechariah. He said that in this day, a heavenly being would place his feet on the Mount of Olives and a great valley would be opened which would stretch as far as Asal."

Luke whistled.

"The Mount of Olives brings it right on Jerusalem's doorstep."

"Saul told us there could be earthquakes. They would be the result, if large enough pieces of the comet struck the earth - I think he said, 'it will ring

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like a bell'. We'd better be ready for more. I don't think our God is finished with Gog and his Horde just yet!"

On the Plain of Esdraelon, the tents of the invading army had been swept away and their occupants exposed to the full fury of the elements. The ground had quickly turned into a quagmire under the intensity of the downpour. Within living memory, it had never rained as it did. The drainage channels could not cope and the normally well positioned and constructed latrines, quickly filled and overflowed, adding to the misery of the rain soaked men.

Georgi Malenski emerged from his shelter before the earthquake struck, which was just as well, for the tiny villa collapsed into a ruin with the first impact. He looked back at it without emotion, if he had been within it, he would have been killed - but it was not yet his time - even the hail, almost as big as a man's fist, avoided striking him. It fell all around and there were terrible injuries amongst those no more than a few paces distant, but not one piece touched him. His calmness was unnatural and those who lay bloody and dying began to curse his aloofness.

The wind still blew with frenetic strength and the rain continued to lash down as he bent his body to face it and walk through the camp. His thin tunic clinging to his body like a shroud. He muttered to himself and those close enough when he passed, heard him reciting the words of Ezekiel the prophet.

'In my jealousy and in the heat of my anger I swear that on that day there shall be a great earthquake throughout the land of Israel. The fish in the sea and the birds in the air, the wild animals and all reptiles that move on the ground, all mankind on the face of the earth, all shall be shaken before me. Mountains shall be torn up, and terraced hills collapse, and every wall crash to the ground. I will summon universal terror against Gog, saith the Lord, and his men shall turn their swords against one another. I will bring him to judgement with pestilence and bloodshed; I will pour down teeming rain, hailstones hard as rock, and fire and brimstone upon him, upon his squadrons, upon the whole concourse of peoples with him. Thus will I prove myself great and holy and make myself known to many nations; they shall know that I am the Lord.'

The aftershocks from the major quake continued to rock the area. Michael managed to re-establish contact with his captains and found that they had secured their positions and that their men had sustained very few injuries. Eli returned after a while, it was at the time when Michael was making another futile attempt to contact Jerusalem.

"Why don't they respond!? There must be someone at the communication centre! Either that, or the Jerusalem has been wrecked!"

Luke was trying to pacify him.

"You can't assume that, Michael - more than likely, the communication links have been knocked out. I'm sure everything is fine!"

Michael glared at him.

"On what basis can you make that assumption!? Damn it, man! Leah and my family are there! I don't know if they're dead or alive!"

"I'm sure everything is fine, Michael!"

Michael glared at him again and turned to Eli.

"Do you think you can find a volunteer who would take the risk to fly

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through this cloud of muck!? We must re-establish links to Jerusalem."

"I'll get on to it, Michael."

Eli ducked out of the doorway before Michael could change his mind. Luke coughed diplomatically.

"You don't agree with the move?"

"I hope you haven't created another Uriah the Hittite."

"Explain!"

"I don't need to - it must be obvious to you that Eli is already on his way to Jerusalem - he volunteered himself! I just hope he doesn't get killed in the hottest place of the battle - for the wrong reasons!"

"The hottest place of the battle will be here, Luke - down there on the plain. I've probably done him a favour by sending him to a safe area - and I resent the implication that I've deliberately sent him to his death!"

The hammer blows from the hailstorm eased and it became obvious to Malenski, that his army had taken many casualties. The ground was a swamp of mud and excrement. Men lay in the filth, some of them at their last gasp, whilst others had blood streaming from their wounds. The clouds still rolled and billowed above them, but the glaring light of the comet still illuminated the scene in stark reality. His captains began to assemble around him. He hardly noticed their condition. He was looking beyond them and beyond the moaning, cursing men, who had been the cream of his army. He pointed in a great sweeping curve.

"Can you see them, the hillsides are covered in men!"

His captains turned and stared at the harshly defined mountains. One shouted at him.

"I see nothing!"

Gog screamed in fury.

"You MUST see them! We are surrounded by tens of thousands of armed men, they are waiting to start their attack, I tell you!"

Another responded with a touch of derision.

"You're dreaming, Georgi - there is no one there - except ben Levi's toy warriors!"

Their commander's fury increased beyond the limit of sanity. He drew his sword and thrust it into the man's back. The blood streamed down over his hand and his captain fell to the ground. The others looked at him and stepped away, their hands on their own weapons. He yanked his weapon free and advanced on them.

"You are all blind! I don't need any of you! Ten thousand times ten thousand of the host of heaven are poised to sweep down on us and all you can do is deny the evidence of your own eyes!"

He swung round and pointed to the heart of his camp. The followers of the captain he had just butchered, were coming to their senses. They were slipping and sliding through the mud, but they came with drawn swords, there could be little doubt that their intention was revenge. Malenski screamed on.

"Can't you see the black angels of evil who stand ready to fight with us? We will conquer them yet! They have their ten thousands and we have our matching host! Gog will lead them - Gog will lead you all!"

Some of his captains remained loyal, why, it was hard to say. They saw the menace posed by the advancing avengers and they called their own men into action. Gog stood silent, paralysed by visions no others could see, whilst his army split into opposing groups who surged back and forth in mortal

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combat.

Michael watched from the heights of Megiddo. He saw the call to arms and the surging combat which ensued. He focused his glasses on the lone figure standing motionless in the centre of the affray. Incredibly, Malenski was untouched by the surging figures around him, even when it looked as if the fighting would flow over him. Michael took the glasses from his eyes, he stared at Luke.

"I must go down to him - the man has suffered a complete mental collapse. He isn't responsible for his actions, he doesn't realise what's happening around him. I must go to him!"

Luke lowered his own glasses and stared into his commander's tense face.

"It isn't your place to intervene, Michael! You are fond of reciting your prophecies to us and you tell us that they justify everything you do. I've never heard it mentioned that Michael ventures down on to the Plain of Esdraelon to rescue Gog from the inevitable consequences of his own actions!"

Michael looked at him steadily.

"I intend to go!"

"And I intend that you won't!"

Michael eyed him warily.

"I order you to stand aside - either that, or you can consider yourself dismissed from my service, is that understood?"

Luke nodded calmly.

"If that's how you want it - very well, Michael, I won't stand in your way - and I will try to explain to Leah and perhaps your son at a later date, how their husband and father sacrificed his life in a fruitless attempt to save a condemned man."

Michael smiled grimly.

"I will survive - and so will Georgi Malenski!"

"If you say so - "

Michael drew his sword and advanced to the door of the shelter. The hail had stopped completely and even the wind and the rain had died away, it was as if the elements were waiting for the next phase to unfold.

"One more thing, Michael."

Michael turned and received a perfectly executed knockout blow to the jaw. He never knew what hit him. Luke looked down at the recumbent figure and ruefully nursed his knuckles.

"You have a hard chin, Michael ben Levi - like the rest of your head! I suppose this means the end of a perfect friendship - but I never did tell you that Marcus Steinbecker gave me additional orders. He told me to take care of Leah's interests at all times - I failed him, but I certainly won't fail her! That, was for Leah and your son!"

He carefully removed the sword and put it well out of reach. It's owner was still out cold and looked as if he would stay that way for a while. Luke peered out of the window slit and focused his glasses on Georgi Malenski. The man who called himself Gog, was still standing motionless, whilst his army disintegrated into a brawling, bloody shambles around him.

On the heights of Megiddo, Luke could distinctly hear the noise of the battle, the screams of the dying and the hoarse shouts and shrieks of men in mortal combat. Wherever he turned the glasses, he found the same scene. The whole Plain of Esdraelon was a surging mass of fighting figures, sliding

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and slipping in the mire.

Michael uttered a little groan. Luke lowered his glasses and turned to meet the consequences of his insubordination. He had no idea what the penalty might be for knocking out the commander in chief of the defending army. He supposed that in former days, it would have been the death sentence. He doubted if such an extreme action would ensue on this occasion, but he was also quite sure that Michael ben Levi would think of something appropriate.

Michael slowly came into focus and found himself the subject of his aide's steady gaze. The Prince of the Covenant touched his jaw and winced. He moved it around carefully. He said softly.

"I think you've loosened some teeth."

"I'm sorry."

"You do realise that you're fired?"

"I assumed as much - at least, you will be able to give me a testimonial - which is more than my previous employer could! I'll pack my bags."

"You haven't got any!"

"Then, I'll start walking."

Michael managed a painful smile.

"Leave it to the morning - what's happening out there?"

"Carnage - take a look - but, if you try to go down there, I'll hit you again - you can't sack me twice!"

Michael nodded and got to his feet, he took the glasses silently and concentrated them on the motionless man standing unscathed, in the middle what remained of his loyal captains.

51.

The Shuttle piloted by Eli Benjamin struggled towards Jerusalem. Michael ben Levi had asked him to call for volunteers. If anyone cared to challenge him in the future, he would tell them that he had been the first in line! He had left his militia in the hands of a capable lieutenant, who was breathlessly eager to prove his worth. It was a happy arrangement, Eli had no reason for feeling guilty about leaving the battlefield. Another dominating factor was that he was acutely worried about the well-being of Leah and her children. He didn't waste time trying to work out the psychological implications of Michael entrusting him with the task of finding someone to undertake the hazardous journey across the Judaeon high country. He was almost certain that Michael had guessed that he would be the one to try to get through.

It wasn't the activity of the enemy which caused him the greatest concern. They had never attempted to interfere with the communication route from Jerusalem to the forward lines around Esdraelon. It was assumed that they either didn't have the capability, or that some quirk in the mental processes of Georgi Malenski, caused him to disdain any attempt to cut the aerial supply link. There was no reason to suppose that they would have a change of heart or tactics on a night such as this was developing to be.

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Flying conditions were rugged, without any doubt, the worst that Eli had ever experienced. The shuttle bucked around the sky like a skittish war horse. He wrestled with the controls until he was white knuckled. There were moments when he was forced to slow the vehicle to a crawl, because of a ferocious rain storm. At other times, he had to seriously consider trying to find a landing place on the darkened hilltops below, with a ninety percent chance that he would end up as a fireball. He prayed that there would not be a return of the fist sized hail which had wrought such havoc on the forces of Gog.

Somehow, he brought the lurching shuttle through the sixty odd kilometres separating the Vale of Esdraelon from Jerusalem. When he crossed the last ridge before the Holy City, he could see that it was in total darkness. His anxiety increased. Michael had ordered that the lights of the city should be kept burning. It was a sign of surety, of confidence - and an indication that the coming of Gog and his Horde would in no way disrupt the peace and comfort of the City of God. The fact that the place was in darkness, pointed to something being drastically wrong.

He came in as low as he dared over the darkened streets. The Temple Mount was a dark hump to one side, it too, was in total darkness, as were the suburbs crouched around its base. Leah's small villa was beyond Moriah. He strained his eyes into the garish light of the comet illuminated sky, trying to see the open space close to the house. It was there that he would attempt a landing. He hovered above the dwelling, it too was totally dark. He strained his eyes into the dark well of vacant ground, to ensure himself that he wouldn't set down on something already occupying it.

There was no sign of life from the house, as he came to a halt. Eli's uneasiness increased - for one wild moment, he wondered if Gog had arranged a diversion, knowing that Michael would be facing him at Esdraelon - and had sent some of his forces to capture Michael's wife and children - and to recover his own son. It would not be beyond the realm of possibility.

A tiny glimmer of light floated against the darkness of the house wall. Soon, it was submerged in the comet glare, to be replaced by a solitary, dark figure, which stumbled towards him. Eli placed his hand on his sheathed sword, ready for any treachery. He dropped it away, when he saw that it was a woman. She held the light higher as she came into the shadow of the shuttle.

"I am Captain Eli Benjamin, sister - with a message from Michael for Leah."

The light wavered and the figure appeared to stumble. Eli steadied her, he could see that she was one of the elderly house servants, whom he recognised from his visit to the villa in the hills. She whispered.

"Leah will be so pleased! We are very frightened, Captain Benjamin - we thought the house was going to fall and the ground is still shaking."

As confirmation, there was another tremble from beneath their feet. Eli steadied himself and the woman against the side of the shuttle.

"So I can see! Where are all the men, you shouldn't be wandering around in these conditions!"

"They've all gone to the east of the city - a great chasm has opened up through the Mount of Olives - or so they say. A great valley, no one can be sure how far it stretches. The power links have been broken. The whole city is in darkness, nothing works any more."

The old woman was becoming talkative with her returning confidence.

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Eli interrupted her gently.

"Perhaps, we had better go to the house - they might be worried something has happened to you - and I rather think we're going to have another deluge of rain!"

The clouds were rolling in, great, billowing and turbulent. Eli had never seen anything like them in the two hundred and twenty years he had lived. They made the house with a few seconds to spare, before the heavens opened and lashing rain obscured the shape of the shuttle. He helped the old woman to close the door against the gathering wind.

"Whew! That's wild!"

He took the lamp and held it high. They were in the small foyer from which the other rooms of the house led. Leah appeared in a doorway, she carried her infant son. She eyed him steadily.

"Eli!"

"I'm sorry if you thought it was Michael - greetings, Leah. I hope everything is well here?"

She nodded without a smile.

"As well as can be expected. We have no power and no means of communication. We have no idea of what's happening beyond the house!"

"Michael asked me to try to get through, to assure you that he's safe and well - and to be certain that you were safe. He knew the earthquake would be centred on the Mount of Olives, you see."

She nodded again.

"Yes, he knew that - you say, he asked you to try to reach us?"

Eli grinned a little.

"He asked me to find a volunteer - shall we say, I didn't see the need to look very far! I also wanted to be sure that you were all right."

"As you can see, I am! Thank you for showing such an interest."

Eli eyed her warily. There was something about her attitude which told him that she was very disturbed. She held the child as if she and it were alone against the world. He tried another tack.

"I hope the baby is well? Michael is very proud of his son - what is his name, by the way?"

It was a mistake which he couldn't rectify.

"Michael hasn't yet named our son - perhaps he will, if and when he returns!"

"There can be no doubt that he will return, Leah. You must be quite sure of that! - Michael will come back to you and his family."

Leah didn't drop her gaze, but tears began to flow unchecked.

"You were with him when he left, Eli. Can you answer me one question? Why did he leave without saying goodbye to me? He must have known that we might never meet again. Was his mind so taken up with thoughts of Gog and the battle, that he couldn't bring himself to kiss me and our child?"

Eli shuffled uneasily.

"I believe Michael loves you so much that he thought it best to slip away whilst you slept. He knew he would come back to you - and his thoughts were full of you and his new son, especially when we saw the disaster which has overtaken Georgi Malenski and his armies. He wanted someone to come to you to make sure you were all right and to reassure you that he was well and safe - doesn't that tell you something, Leah?"

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The child gave a little wail and Leah bent her head over it. Eli couldn't read tell whether his words had had the desired effect. She looked up and there wasn't much to be read from her expression.

"You'd better come inside, Eli - you look exhausted. Tell me what's happened at Armageddon."

He followed her into the room and in the flickering light of primitive oil lamps, he told her the story of the storm and the deluge of hail. She shook her head in wonderment.

"We had no hail here - heavy rain, certainly - but no hail. It must be random squalls."

He shook his head.

"I'm sure it isn't random, Leah - the best description I can give to it is that it's - directed! A precise and selected downpour upon the heads of Gog and his Horde. Already, the conditions in the valley are almost indescribable - filth and mud and bloody, horribly injured men, screaming in pain with no one to help them. In the middle of it all, Georgi Malenski stands and stares with eyes that see something others can't see - and yet, not one hailstone touched him - I believe that he's being reserved for what is still to come!"

She dropped her eyes.

"And you say, that Michael is safe and well?"

He leaned forward in his chair.

"I say that he loves you and is so proud to have a son - and that he will come back to you when this is all over!"

She looked up and held his eyes. There was no doubt that this boy was hopelessly in love with her! It wasn't vanity which caused that deduction, just a certainty which she couldn't deny. Michael had displayed an incredible wisdom in sending Eli to her as his champion. Eli had done little else since his arrival, but to declare to her the undoubted love of her husband, his devotion and the surety of his return. A little smile played around her lips. Michael was a consummate politician!

"What will you do now, Eli."

The young man came out of his trance.

"I must try to re-establish communications with the battle captains - and from here to Megiddo."

"That is Michael's Command Post?"

He nodded.

"He can oversee the entire plain from there."

They were interrupted. The elderly house servant had returned in some agitation.

"Excuse me, sister Leah - but I think you should see - the sky is very strange over the eastern hills!"

They followed her to the rear of the house and into a small courtyard which opened to a garden which sloped away down the side of the hill. The old woman pointed to the dark silhouette of the hilltops. Asher's old home lay in that direction. Above the featureless crest of blackness and even despite the brilliant glare of the comet, the sky was streaked with fire trails. They crossed back and forth, dying away, to be renewed by an increasing number of bursts. Eli murmured.

"It's a meteor shower - but I've never seen one of such intensity!"

As they watched, it increased in magnitude. The whole sky was alight with debris trails as the tiny specks of material burned up in the outer layers

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of the atmosphere. It was when some failed to complete their evaporation into gas, that Eli was galvanised into action. He herded the household members who had joined them, back into the shelter of the villa.

"Quickly! You must all go down into the wine cellar - immediately! No arguments, please! It isn't safe to stay above ground - trust me - do as I say!"

They obeyed, cowed into submission by the urgency on his face. In the cellar, they faced each other, their faces frightened and drawn in the flickering light of the oil lamps. He explained.

"That is no ordinary meteor storm, Leah. Remember what my brother told you? He said that the tail of the comet would be composed of smaller or larger pieces of debris - by the look of what we've just seen, there are some large pieces - and perhaps there are even larger ones to come!"

Leah whispered:

'I will bring him to judgement with pestilence and bloodshed; I will pour down teeming rain, hailstones hard as rock, and fire and brimstone, upon him, upon his squadrons, upon the whole concourse of peoples with him ... '

Eli nodded grimly.

"May our God have mercy upon those who are faithful to Him, that they find shelter from the universal terror which He has summoned against Gog!"

An uneasy truce existed between the two men who shared the command post on the brow of Megiddo. Luke was still watchful, lest Michael should take it into his head to make another attempt to go to the aid of Georgi Malenski. For his part, Michael seemed to have abandoned the idea, being content to put the table and chairs back into an upright position, from where they had been sent crashing to the floor by the earthquake. Periodically, there were still aftershocks, but nothing as severe as the original quake.

Luke kept one eye on him and with the other maintained a watch on the turmoil taking place below the hill. It showed no signs of abating. Ferocious skirmishes were taking place between the supposedly united army which Malenski had brought into the Fairest of all Lands. The portion they occupied could hardly qualify for that description. It was a sea of mud and debris and if anything, the water level was rising. Luke presumed that the rivers which ran through the plain, together with the irrigation ditches which had been cut between them, were now swamped with rising floodwaters streaming down from the hills. He heard Michael stir and tensed warily.

"What's happening down there, Luke."

He looked round and found Michael standing two paces distant from him. It was the first time he had showed any interest since recovering from Luke's attack. Luke held out his glasses and stepped away from the window slit without answering. Michael put them to his eyes and focused on the solitary figure of Georgi Malenski, who still stood in a trance-like state in the midst of the battling men. Luke said softly.

"I wonder what he sees."

"He sees a much greater battle - of that you can be sure. It's a battle which started long before the first rainstorm which swept over us. Armageddon is universal, it isn't confined to a small valley below Megiddo. It is being waged in realms we can't even imagine, between combatants and forces we couldn't describe. Angels are fighting with devils and Michael the angel Prince fights the old Dragon, the serpent who first tempted Eve. Titanic

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forces are locked in mortal combat - and there can be only one outcome. When the battle is finished, Satan and his angels will be cast into the lake of fire, which is the Second Death!"

Luke eyed him from across the room.

"You sound as if you've seen it."

Michael nodded, but he didn't take his eyes from the scene below.

"How long, I wonder, will he be left to stand there. He reminds me of historical pictures I have seen of men who are under sentence of death and are waiting for the execution to be carried out. I can't see his face clearly, but I get the impression that he is completely calm. I'm sure that he doesn't know what's happening around him. He's no longer conscious of this world - perhaps he too, is looking at the great battle being waged in another place."

Luke was standing in the entrance, it was a subconscious blocking of Michael's means of going to Malenski's rescue. Michael turned and smiled gently.

"You don't need to worry, my friend - I have no intention of going down to him - that madness has passed!"

"I'm very glad to hear it!"

"I owe you a clout on the jaw!"

"I'll try to remember when it counts!"

Michael nodded and turned back to the window.

"I wonder if Eli got through?"

"I sincerely hope he did - take a look at what's happening!"

Michael joined him at the door, which faced to the east. The sky was alight with shooting stars, the traces gathered in intensity, until the light of the comet was overwhelmed by a tracery of fire trails. The earth shook again under them and they braced against the creaking structure. Michael shouted.

"You can take your pick! We either stay inside and risk the roof falling on us - or we can stay out in what's coming - as for me, I'll risk the roof!"

They retreated inside and stared at each other grimly.

"Saul was right, the comet's tail is shedding debris across the earth. The tremors we can feel are more than likely bigger pieces coming down on the eastern mountains."

The trembling increased. Luke muttered.

"I hope Eli reached Jerusalem."

"Amen to that - I pray that Leah and the children are under cover - together with those who don't qualify to come under a hail of fire from heaven!"

Their ears were nearly deafened with shrill whistles, as small pieces of meteorite debris screamed to earth. Michael chanced a look through the window. One or two landed very close, but the building wasn't struck. He could see the white hot glow which had burrowed itself and fused into the rocks of the hill. There were other screams, this time, less shrill - hoarse, almost subhuman. The valley was glowing with a concentration of the flying, white-hot projectiles. The fighting had stopped. He could see men running for their lives. It was a scene out of hell. He realised that it was precisely that! Hell was being visited on Gog and his Horde and the grim words of prophecy were being fulfilled: 'I will summon universal terror against Gog, saith the Lord God.'

Michael wanted to turn aside from the sickening sight, but he was compelled to remain with his glasses trained on the horrifying scene. Georgi

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Malenski stood in the midst of it all. Michael focused his glasses on his face. Georgi's expression was like that of a child faced with a special event, for which he had waited with impatience. Michael felt the tears trickled down his face. He looked so much like Piotr in that moment, as if he had recovered his innocence and his sanity. Until that instant, not one of the fiery rocks had touched him. They were increasing in number by the second, it could only be a matter of time, before he joined the rest of his decimated army in death.

The fiery ball which terminated the life of Georgi Malenski, was the size of a small boulder. Michael heard the scream of its coming long before it hit the ground and started to roll along. It left a long fiery trail and small pieces shattered off with the impact. It glowed white hot and Georgi turned to face it. He made no attempt to jump out of its path, or to run before it. He stood there and waited. Michael had the impression, that at the last moment, he turned his head and looked up the hillside to Michael's command post and through the glasses, for a fleeting moment, their eyes met - but it could only have been imagination. The ball of flame passed the place where Georgi had stood and when it was gone, so had its target.

Michael dropped the glasses and slumped down with his back to the wall. He bowed his head and wept uncontrollably. Luke clenched his teeth in a ferocious snarl and stood and watched him. There was nothing he could do.

The firestorm continued for another hour and the Valley of Esdraelon was purged of Gog's Horde. It was nearly morning when the last of the meteor shower had passed. Michael had risen to his feet. It was obvious that he was totally spent. He looked out into the scene of carnage and at the gathering flocks of birds, which wheeled in great, lazy circles above the valley of death. He murmured quietly.

'Man, these are the words of the Lord God: Cry to every bird that flies and to every wild beast: Come, assemble, gather from every side to my sacrifice, the great sacrifice I am making for you on the mountains of Israel; eat flesh and drink blood, eat the flesh of warriors and drink the blood of princes of the earth; all these are your rams and sheep, he-goats and bulls, and buffaloes of Bashan. You shall cram yourselves with fat and drink yourselves drunk on blood at the sacrifice which I am preparing for you. At my table you shall eat your fill of horses and riders, of warriors and all manner of fighting men. This is the very word of the Lord God.'

The comet was setting in the north-west. On the next day and for many days to come, it would still rise and be visible over the Fairest of all Lands, but it would slowly continue its journey towards the sun and then return back to its origin beyond the Solar System. It had served its purpose. It was a natural phenomenon which had served its Creator for a divine reason.

Above the devastated Plain of Esdraelon, Michael acknowledged wearily, that the last battle had been fought and now, all that remained was the aftermath, the slow recovery - the cleansing of the land. A new era had begun, one in which they would wait for the End of Time.

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He stayed a little longer at his Command Post above the smoke filled valley. There was one task which still remained and that was to identify the body of Gog. It was something he wanted to do for himself, although Luke was strenuous in his objections.

"You won't stop me this time, Luke! This is something I have to do - and we are faced with the task of burying the dead. I won't have it said of me that Michael ben Levi shrank from walking through the corpses, but was quite ready to ask others to remove them to their place of burial. From a personal viewpoint, I want to find Georgi Malenski - I won't be looking for Gog, I will be looking for a man who was friend enough to entrust me with his son - and if one day, Piotr was to ask me about his father, I want to be able to tell him everything - even how he looked in death!"

Luke shook his head.

"I think you won't find words to describe it - not to a man's son. There are some things best left alone - and this is one of them, Michael! - Damn it, man! You have a wife and child who are worried sick about you. We still haven't got a link to Jerusalem. Aren't you - ?"

His voice trailed away in embarrassment. Michael nodded encouragement.

"Go on! You were about to ask me if I was concerned about them - or if I'm more concerned about a dead man, who represented the forces of evil!"

Luke held his gaze.

"Don't put words in my mouth, Michael! Since you pose the question - might I say that someone else might ask it?"

Michael brushed past him and began the descent into the haze of the valley. He nearly retched from the stench of burnt flesh. It overlaid other odours, but the foul smell of overflowing latrines permeated through. It was not long before his movements disturbed the large birds who had already settled on the corpses. He turned his eyes away from some of the sights, but the memory would stay with him for the rest of his days.

He knew roughly where he would find the corpse of Georgi Malenski. He steeled himself for what he would find - perhaps it would be very little. From his vantage point, he had seen the approach of the flaming meteorite, it had appeared to collect the man who had stood in its path and to carry him forward - to where, Michael could not be sure. Some of the corpses he passed were still locked in postures of combat, their swords clenched in stiffened fingers. Their features were permanently set in ferocious snarls, they reminded him of the history tapes of the gargoyles superstitious builders had once placed on prominent buildings to frighten away the devils. The devils these men could not frighten away, had been within their own souls.

The words of the prophet Zechariah echoed in his mind:

'And the plague shall be like this: their flesh shall rot while they stand on their feet, their eyes shall rot in their sockets, and their tongues shall rot in their mouths.'

He found a broad, scorched track and turned into the valley, following the seared earth and rock, knowing that this was the path of the fiery hammer which had taken Malenski's life. Quite suddenly, he found him. He had been

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thrown to one side. He was hideously injured in his lower parts, but his face was intact. It was completely without disfigurement and his facial expression was steady and cool. The expression had set into a grim smile, as if he had found the whole experience a macabre joke. Michael had a profound desire to vomit. He fought it down. Someone was blundering along behind him - it was Luke, who glanced down at the corpse before grabbing Michael by the arm.

"For the love of God, Michael - come away! You've found him - you've proved your point - no one doubts your willingness to walk through the dead! Now, go home to your wife and let those with stronger stomachs clean out this mess!"

Michael didn't resist, allowing himself to be led back to the Command Post. A shuttle had landed close by, Eli Benjamin was waiting.

"Leah and the children are well, Michael. Naturally, they're very anxious to see you. I did my best, but I think your wife wants to see for herself that you're in one piece! I wasn't able to restore the communication links. By the look of them, it will be some time, if ever, before they work again. The earthquake was very severe - the Mount of Olives is split wide open - a huge valley. The way to the Salt Sea Terminal is cut. The Pod System is totally defunct. I flew over the coastal strip - a similar scene of devastation to here - Jerusalem and the areas under our control, were hardly touched by the meteor storm - it was very selective - quite incredible."

The flood came to a halt, Michael made no sign that he had heard. Eli looked quickly at Luke, who shook his head.

"Eli is going to take you back to Jerusalem, Michael. You are needed there."

Michael seemed to hear him, he nodded. He gave the impression that he was completely sapped. Eli took his arm and led him to the Shuttle, there was no resistance, no arguments. There was no conversation on the journey back to Jerusalem. Eli covered in a very short space of time. He landed close to Leah's home and led the unresisting Michael to the outer door. Leah was waiting. Her eyes widened in an unspoken question when she saw her husband. Eli offered a lame explanation.

"This man hasn't slept in forty-eight hours - put him straight to bed!"

Leah took control and left Eli to his own devices. She returned after a while.

"What's happened to him, Eli? I couldn't get him to say more than a word or two!"

"I wish I knew - I'm sure it's nothing physical. I had a quick word with Luke before we left. Michael was all right before he insisted on taking a walk amongst the dead - in particular, he was determined to find the body of Georgi Malenski!"

"And he did find him?"

Eli nodded.

"Luke tells me that it was very badly - damaged."

Leah shuddered.

"I never understood the relationship between Michael and Georgi. They met no more than a half dozen times - they never really got to know each other as friends - but there was a strange connection between them. Feodor told me that the first time they met, it was as if they forged an invisible bond. He had expected antagonism, even hatred, but this was a union of like

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minded men. Under different circumstances, they could have been inseparable. Feodor laughed when he told me, he said they reminded him of spiritual twins!"

"Perhaps he wasn't so far wrong. They were linked by the fact of Ezekiel's prophesy. They were destined to take their respective places at Armageddon - "

Leah murmured.

"Hooks in their jaws, Eli - Hooks in their jaws. They couldn't do other than what was expected of them - and now it is over. I believe Michael didn't really think Gog had died - that's why he wanted to see the corpse - and when he saw it, quite suddenly, he realised that his own part had come to an end. He was no longer the focal point against the evil that Gog represented. Perhaps Michael has lost his direction!"

"What will you do?"

"What can I do? I will be there for him and try to show him that life has some meaning after Armageddon!"

Eli left her and returned to Megiddo. His capable lieutenant could be relied upon to hold the fort, but the circumstances demanded that the captain was in control. Leah felt a sense of desertion. Certainly, she wasn't alone, there were reliable house servants, who would take care of the children. She had a nurse to watch over the baby - but she needed her husband. She walked softly to the door of the bedroom and peered in. He looked as if he was sleeping, but she couldn't be sure if it was a pretence.

In the hallway outside the room, she fell to her knees and pleaded to her God that he would give her the strength and the wisdom to combat the condition into which Michael had fallen. The Administration needed him! Everything was in disarray - concise directions were imperative. There was so much to handle - and even Luke was absent and she had no way of reaching him. She got to her feet again and took another look. Michael hadn't moved. She returned softly to the communal room.

The nurse brought her the baby, it was time to feed him. She put him to the breast and looked down at the urgent activity of him suckling. She tried to relax. To become too tense would have possible repercussions for her ability to continue to nourish him. She had barely finished before the first visitors started to arrive for urgent discussions with the Administrator. Word had circulated that he had returned, it had been accompanied by graphic details of the outcome of the battle. The visitors were excited, a little awe stricken that their Administrator would have been involved in such a decisive exhibition of Godly power, and they were also quite sure that he would have the answer for all their ills. Leah met them and led them into the communal room - it was the only one large enough to take the number. She looked into their anxious faces and her heart sank.

"I hope you will understand - Michael isn't able to talk to you at the moment. He is totally exhausted and must be given time to recover his strength."

They looked at her, one cleared his throat.

"When might we expect him to be available, sister Leah? We have so many pressing concerns, the entire infrastructure is wrecked."

She nodded calmly.

"I would expect nothing less - a great deal of effort will be required to return things to normal."

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One intoned gloomily.

"I very much doubt if we will ever get back to where we were!"

She leaned forward.

"We must try to restore the basic services first - at a later stage, we can worry about the rest."

The original speaker recovered the initiative.

"Sister Leah, many of us know you from the time of our dear Father Asher - we would value your suggestions on where to start - of course, only during the absence of your husband."

There was a chorus of agreement. Leah eyed them warily.

"Michael will be able to talk to you soon, brothers."

"We have an immediate need, sister Leah!"

Leah looked from one to the other, she had their undivided attention.

"Very well - if the situation is so urgent. I must emphasise that I can only make suggestions."

"That is understood, sister Leah."

She gathered her thoughts, it had been a long time since she had had to exercise the skills which had served, Asher and then Marcus and finally, Michael. It seemed an eternity since she had conducted similar meetings in her office in Salem. She dismissed the thought of the Far East, it was totally out of reach, both to assist her, or for her to render assistance if it should be required.

"It seems to me that the first priority is to establish a status for the essentials. I regard the essentials as the provision of food, water, power and sanitation for Jerusalem in the first instance, and then for the smaller cities and towns. The next level of priority is an assessment of every structure left standing after the earthquake and the removal of citizens from those which are unsound. The next level is to re-establish communications. Determine why are we unable to contact other cities within Judaea and then, those which are further afield. Make a survey of the Pod Transit System and determine whether it is possible to restore it. When we establish communications, find out the status of the Salt Sea Terminal. In general, let us evaluate the damage to facilities and crops and start planning how we will care for the population in the longer term!"

She paused.

"I hope this provides a framework, brothers. Michael has always had the greatest regard for your capabilities - we must not allow the extreme circumstances to freeze our initiative. We have suffered serious damage and disruption, but we have been left with our lives. All of you reported to Michael on the specialist responsibilities he asked you to supervise. Make a thorough assessment and report back here for an evening briefing, by that time, I hope Michael will have recovered."

They left the house looking slightly more happy than when they had entered. One lingered, it was an advisor Michael had inherited from Asher. Malachi Judah was well into his seventh century. Leah had known him all her life, and held him in high regard. He was assessing her gently.

"I haven't had the opportunity to congratulate you on the birth of your son - what have you named him, by the way?"

Leah blushed a little.

"We haven't had the opportunity as yet."

Malachi's smile widened and then faded again.

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"I have known you since you were no bigger than a grasshopper! Now, you are a mother for the third time."

Leah forced a smile.

"Even grasshoppers grow up, brother Malachi."

"So they do - so they do - but this particular grasshopper hasn't learned to pull the wool over old Malachi's eyes. Tell me, what is really wrong with Michael?"

She had expected the question, but it was still produced with the speed of a rapier. She evaded the thrust.

"He is exhausted - when he came home, he could hardly put two words together. I'm sure you would be the first to understand that he has expended a great deal of nervous energy trying to assess where and when Gog would make his next move. In colloquial terms, he's out on his feet."

Malachi nodded.

"Asher trained you well, my dear - but he also trained old Malachi! I'll take your explanation for now - but remember, if you find yourself in need of help, I will always be at hand."

She thanked him and felt the prick of tears in her eyes as she did so. It was hard to say why she felt it necessary to hide Michael's true condition from such an old and faithful assistant. She led him to the door and he walked away from her small house without a backward glance. It was time to return to Michael. She responded to a sudden impulse and took her son with her.

Her husband had turned on his side and was facing the wall when she entered. She felt a surge of anxiety. For some reason, she was reminded of Israel's king, who had been told that he was to die. He also had turned his face to the wall and had wept, the end of the story was that he had been given another fifteen years of life. She pulled herself together and approached the bed in a businesslike manner. She walked around it and faced Michael, whose eyes widened a little.

"I'm glad to see you're awake! I brought your son to see you."

Michael stared at her without moving. Leah went on.

"I thought we could exchange roles. I'm doing your work - so you can do mine!"

She laid the child next to him and stepped back.

"When he needs feeding, he will let you know! Unless you have unsuspected talents, you can ask one of the servants to find me. In the meantime, I'm going to try to sort out the urgent needs of your Administration - and one other thing! Perhaps the presence of your son will stimulate you to think of a name for him - He can't go through life being called Junior!"

She didn't wait for an answer, instead, she turned and stalked out of the room, closing the door panel manually. She leaned against the wall and closed her eyes. Tears trickled down her cheeks. She pulled herself together and marched resolutely to Michael's office. Luke was waiting for her. She fell against his chest and wept openly.

"What's happened to him, Luke - where has he gone!?"

"It's early days yet, Leah - have patience. Michael has lived and breathed Gog and his Horde for over twenty years. It became the prime motive for his existence - that's part of it. The other part is the strange relationship which existed between them. I can't understand that, and I doubt if anyone ever will - I'm not even sure that Michael did."

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Leah drew back from him.

"What can we do for him, Luke? I've had his advisors here. They all want answers. They need his guiding hand and firm direction. In a few hours they will come back. I suggested a complete assessment of the damage and tried to establish priorities - but it's Michael they need."

"Where is he? Perhaps I can talk some sense into his thick head before I leave!"

She stared at him hard.

"Where are you going?"

Luke turned to the window and stared out.

"He dismissed me!"

"What!"

"We had an argument - he gave me the sack!"

"Rubbish! What happened - it can't be that serious."

"I shouldn't be here at all - I hit him - and he gave me my marching orders."

"You HIT him?"

Luke nodded.

"It was for his own good - he was knocked out for a few minutes - but I'm quite sure it has nothing to do with his present state of health."

Leah eyed him sternly.

"I don't care whether he dismissed you or not - I'm reappointing you! I've never heard of such nonsense, two grown men coming to blows like schoolboys!"

"I don't think Michael will see it that way."

"Michael doesn't see it any way, at the moment! He's laying on the bed, staring at the wall - and I hope, looking after our son!"

Luke looked a little shocked.

"Is that wise?"

Leah shook her head.

"I have no concerns that he'll hurt the baby, if that's what you mean - and our son has his own methods for demanding attention and they don't recognise a parent who wants to ignore the world and stare at the wall!"

Luke grinned slowly.

"I think it might be a good time to see whether your therapy has worked."

They returned to the bedroom and opened the door cautiously. A wail disturbed the tranquillity. Michael was sitting on the side of the bed and nursing a protesting infant. Leah took the baby without a word and left Luke with her husband. Luke looked down at his ex-employer.

"Your boy has a lusty pair of lungs, Michael."

Michael didn't raise his head, instead he nodded slowly and then he whispered.

"Why do I feel like this? What's happened to me?"

Luke eased down beside him.

"If I knew what you feel, I might be able to answer."

There was a long hesitation.

"If feel - numb - I suppose that's the word. Everything seems to be a vast distance away from me. Everything and everyone seems beyond touching. I hear what people say and I know that I should answer - and sometimes I even have an answer ready, but it all seems to be too much

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effort to form the words - or to reach out. I'm in a kind of mental fog. I can feel nothing, no emotions. I had my son in my arms, but that was only a reaction to his cry. I felt nothing for him. I looked down and wondered why I was holding this strange child. I knew he was mine, but it provoked no emotion."

Luke took his time to answer. He groped for what he hoped were the right words.

"You were all right when you left the Command Post, this morning. I watched you march down the hill. It was a different man that I helped back. Something happened to you when you were in the valley. Tell me what you saw and how you felt."

Michael was so long in responding, that he wondered if he had heard him.

"I remember the stench. I don't think I will ever forget that smell - and then, there were the birds, tearing into the flesh of men with those savage beaks and talons! That is a sight I will never forget. The slime and filth on the ground - pieces of men where they had been torn apart by the firestorm. Then, I saw the gouge left by the rock which killed Georgi. It was really very small, nothing more than a pebble. From the Command Post, I thought it was so much bigger, but I suppose it was the white hot halo around it. I followed its track along the ground and then I came to him. He was smiling at me, Luke! How can a man die like that and still smile? The birds hadn't touched him, his head and shoulders were whole - but he had a smile around his mouth - how can that be possible? I wonder if he thought it was all some ghastly, cosmic practical joke and he was the recipient? I will never forget that smile - or the stench - or the sight of those men and their punishment!"

Luke cleared his throat, despite doing so, his voice trembled a little.

"At least, you can see that it was a punishment - a righteous punishment, Michael! Don't ever lose sight of that. You told us about the prophecies so often and you could always match them together with what happened. Didn't you ever think about how it would be when the battle was over? The description was there. Gog could read it. Michael could read it. Gog knew the consequences - and so should you have known. What is left on the Plain of Esdraelon, is as much a part of the overall picture as all the rest. You must accept it. You must forget that Georgi Malenski died there. You must remember that Gog met his end in the way which was predestined for him!"

53.

Michael's advisors returned in the middle of the evening. Leah had responded to the bullying of her staff and had managed to eat a little. She knew she had to keep up her strength for the sake of feeding her new child, otherwise, she might not have agreed. The food was tasteless but she persisted until her house servants were moderately satisfied. It became increasingly clear that she would need her strength for other reasons. Luke returned from his visit to Michael, shaking his head.

"I'm sorry Leah, we won't be getting much sense out of Michael for

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some time - You will have to make the decisions that matter!"

She protested.

"Why me? I have no authority to make any decisions. Michael is the Administrator - and when it comes to it, you are his Aide."

"His EX-aide!"

"Don't quibble! You know as much about what's happening in the Administration as anyone."

"He has other advisors - and I have never pretended to be anything other than a willing gopher who did as he was told."

"His other advisors seem to have abdicated. They want answers!"

"And, in Michael's temporary absence from duty, you are the one to provide them!"

The group of advisors trooped into the communal room. They had all arrived at the same time. She had watched their approach to the house, their way illuminated by the persistent pearly light of the receding comet. Their usual method of transport was denied to them, they had been obliged to walk to the house. It was a symbol of the catastrophic losses they had suffered. She waited for them to settle in the assembled seats - there were more than those who had attended the earlier meeting. Word had circulated that Michael ben Levi was to assess the situation. She met Malachi Judah's eyes, they were kindly, almost compassionate.

"Dear brothers, I greet you all."

There was a murmur of response.

"I hope you will not feel that you have wasted your effort in coming here, when I explain to you that Michael is far from well and unable to contribute to this evening's discussion."

She waited for the further murmuring to die down. Malachi rose from his seat.

"I am sure that my brothers will join me in expressing their concern that our dear Administrator is unwell - might we enquire as to the nature of his indisposition?"

"Thank you for your concern, brothers. As far as we can determine, Michael is suffering from physical and mental exhaustion - we hopeful that he will be fully recovered after a period of rest - "

One of the others coughed diplomatically.

"I share in the concern of us all, but I must also emphasise how critical the situation is becoming - the widespread damage to essential services - the dwindling food supplies. We are obligated to take decisive and co-ordinated action."

The silence was heavy until Malachi stirred again.

"If I might make a suggestion? In the short term, perhaps the former Deputy Administrator of the Far East Administrative Area, could assume temporary co-ordinating responsibility? I refer, of course, to our dear sister Leah!"

There was another pregnant pause, before a third advisor rose to his feet.

"I would accept this as being a very satisfactory, short term solution."

This time there was a virtual chorus of agreement. Malachi put another question.

"Are we all in agreement - or is there dissent?"

After a moment, he turned to Leah. The twinkle in his eye was hardly

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suppressed.

"It remains for you to accept, my dear Leah!"

She looked at Luke and found him preoccupied with the status of the ceiling. She turned back to her husband's advisors. So many of them she had known from Asher's day.

"In the short term only - I thank you for your trust!"

The stiffness seemed to evaporate. She wondered how much the episode had been stage managed and how much Malachi had already known about Michael's condition before they had gathered. Once again it struck her, they had all arrived at about the same time - as if they had met somewhere else to formulate a plan of action.

There was no further delay in producing the assessment of each of the essential services. As she had suspected, there had been a major disruption. The earthquake had shattered pipelines and communication links, as well as the direct channels which fed from the power generators in Arabia. Landslides had shattered Pod lines and the earth had shifted here and there, creating major displacements in the Transport Net. Communications were being disrupted by the invisible haze of particles from the tail of the comet. The Earth was still squarely in the stream, although the actual nucleus of the comet had passed. The electro-magnetic field around the planet was supercharged and long range communications were impossible.

All in all, it was a sorry state of affairs. Michael's advisors gave their views and then waited. Leah had seen it happen so many times in the past. The views were expressed and then it was left to Asher or Marcus or Michael - or even herself in Salem, to pronounce words of wisdom - the magic panacea which would solve all their ills. Malachi interrupted the silence before she could reply.

"There is something more, Leah. The Salt Sea Terminal is inoperable - it is impossible to despatch or receive the heavier Transporters - including Suborbitors."

"I hadn't realised that the earthquake had extended that far!"

One of the other advisors interjected.

"The damage is quite widespread, Leah. Our scientists have chosen this time to remind us that we are in a very unstable part of the world and we are still experiencing aftershocks."

Malachi went on.

"The surface of the Salt Sea has opened up into great chasms, some of the intervening surface slabs of salt have slipped over each other, shattering the wide, even tracks upon which the Transporters relied. There is a complete disruption of the surface - There is another factor and this is connected to our fresh water supply difficulties. The Jordan Irrigation System has been badly damaged. The river is now discharging into the Salt Sea in much the same way as it did before the Great Destruction of over a thousand years ago. The surface of the salt pan is fast turning into a slurry of salt and debris!"

Leah stared from one to the other.

"Thank you for your assessments, brothers. I think you will agree that our immediate priorities are to provide the essentials for our population. Fresh water is one of those essentials, so is food and power and sanitation. Let us concentrate our efforts on these. For example, we have portable, solar collectors and others can be improvised. I'm sure we can find alternatives for

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other facilities. If we can't repair the damage, let us attempt to bypass it. If we can't use Pods and Transporters, let us go back to more primitive methods - we can improvise until we can repair. Find ways and means of bringing food from the storages into the cities and towns."

There was a buzz of conversation. Luke interjected loudly.

"There is another matter, Leah - and this must have immediate action."

There was silence once more. Luke looked uncomfortable to be the sudden centre of attention. He ploughed on.

"I refer to Gog's Horde - or rather, the tens of thousands of corpses who were once Gog's Horde! If they are not buried soon, we will leave ourselves wide open to epidemics which will sweep through our population!"

Someone asked.

"Can we not bury them where they have fallen?"

There was a murmur of agreement. Leah interjected sharply.

"No! We cannot bury them where they fell! The Lord has ordained otherwise! I will remind you of His instructions. We have followed the words of prophesy without question until now - we will continue to follow those words when it comes to the disposal of Gog's Horde!"

Malachi nodded encouragement. He leaned back in his chair and closed his eyes.

"I will quote to you the passage to which our sister refers. It is found in the thirty-ninth Chapter of the prophet Ezekiel:

'In that day, I will give to Gog, instead of a burial-ground in Israel, the valley of Abarim east of the Sea. There they shall bury Gog and all his horde, and all of Abarim shall be blocked; and they shall call it the Valley of Gog's Horde. For seven months the Israelites shall bury them and purify the land; all the people shall take their share in the burying. The day that I win myself honour shall be a memorable day for them. This is the very word of the Lord God. Men shall be picked for the regular duty of going through the country and searching for any left above ground, to purify the land; they shall begin their search at the end of seven months. They shall go through the country, and whenever one of them sees a human bone he shall put a marker beside it, until it has been buried in the Valley of Gog's Horde. So no more shall be heard of that great horde and the land will be purified.'

Malachi's voice died away and he opened his eyes abruptly. He smiled at Leah.

"Another of our tasks, my dear Leah - another priority - and we all must share in the duty, every able bodied man who dwells in the Fairest of all Lands. We have been delivered of a great threat - a pestilence of evil - now we must deliver ourselves of the threat of a pestilence which comes from their decaying flesh."

There was another profound silence, which was broken by Luke.

"We must first have the ways and means - has anyone identified this valley - what is it called again? The valley of Abarim?"

"It lies to the east of the Salt Sea in the mountains of Moab - I believe, close to Mount Nebo."

Luke whistled softly.

"It will be quite an undertaking to clean out the Plain of Esdraelon and carry the corpses over the Judaeon Hills and the Salt Sea."

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"Not to mention the considerable number in the Vale of Sharon - "

There was a chorus of other comments from those responsible for other areas. The enormity of the task hit home, one lamented.

"We have no way of transporting the remains - no Pods and only a limited number of Shuttles!"

Leah held up her hand.

"But it must be done, brothers - we must be scrupulous in fulfilling these directions - even to the last bone."

Luke intoned.

"What about Georgi Malenski, Leah? His wife and child lie buried in your own garden - is he to be laid with them?"

Leah hesitated, conscious of their eyes on her. She closed her own and tilted back her head.

"Gog will be buried with his Horde - thus will Israel be purified!"

She opened her eyes and met those of Malachi. He was nodded in gentle approval.

The visitors left late in the evening. She lay back in her chair and acknowledged that she was totally exhausted and completely out of practice with her diplomatic skills. Luke saw the last of them out of the premises. Malachi Judah had looked to be inclined to linger, but had thought better of it when he saw how weary she was. Luke returned and looked down at her.

"You should be in bed! I think you did exceptionally well, by the way."

"Thank you for those few kind words! I fumbled and fudged my way through the discussions by instinct. Half the time, I didn't know what they were talking about."

"It didn't show - and they were satisfied."

"They weren't satisfied, they were just clever enough to let you think they were!"

"Go to bed, Leah."

"I can't, I still have an important job to do."

"Not tonight, Leah! Leave it to tomorrow."

"I might agree - but I don't think he will!"

The nurse had appeared with the baby, he was shouting for his feed. Luke grinned and beat a hasty retreat.

Leah relaxed back in her chair and gently rocked. Feeding the child was the one moment of sanity in the crazy circumstances dominating the household. The child took his time and it was very late before she was satisfied that he had had enough and could walk wearily to the bedroom she shared with Michael. She paused at the door, pulling back her sagging shoulders and trying to look alert and filled with stamina. She had hoped against hope, that Michael would have put in an appearance during the evening, but he had not. When she entered the room, he once more had his back to her and was facing the wall. He was curled up in what was almost a foetal position.

She undressed quickly and slipped into the bed beside him. He made no movement. For a while, she lay silently listening. His breathing wasn't regular enough for him to be sleeping. It was a situation she couldn't allow to go unchallenged.

"I know you're not sleeping, Michael. Talk to me, I don't deserve to be shut out. Whatever is wrong, we will work our way through together."

For a moment, she wasn't sure if he would respond, then, he turned

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over on to his back. The pearly grey light of the comet permeated through the drawn window covers, enough for her to see his face. He said nothing.

"I want you to know how much I love you, Michael - and how much I miss you. Come back to me - and to our son - we need you."

The response was delayed, it appeared to come from a great distance.

"I love you, Leah - and I love our child. I want to be with you, but I'm so far away. I don't know where - or how I can get back."

She placed her head against his. She felt the tears coursing down his face. It was a silent weeping.

"Armageddon is over, Michael. Our God has won the victory - and so have you. You did all that was asked of you, there was nothing more you could have done."

"I could have saved Georgi - Luke stopped me."

Leah looked into his face sharply.

"Is that why Luke hit you? You're wrong, Michael - you couldn't have saved Georgi. Georgi was where he was destined to be and it wasn't part of your task to save him. If you had done so, you would have gone against the intentions of our God! It would never have been permitted. Georgi Malenski had ceased to exist at some time long before he landed on the Plain of Esdraelon. Gog came to meet his destiny - just as you went to Megiddo to fulfil yours. Nothing could have been altered without defying the purpose of the Lord. You must accept that without question, Michael - nothing could have been changed!"

She looked into his eyes, they seemed vacant, as if he was submerged in a deep daydream. She had the insane desire to shake him into life, but resisted it.

"Malachi Judah and the rest of your advisors were here, they asked me to co-ordinate the Administration until you're well."

It provoked a slow response, the eyes focused.

"It sounds a good solution."

"It would be a better solution if you were to do it. I'm fumbling in the dark. I hope I make the right decisions - ones you will approve."

"You will."

"They're very anxious about you."

"I will be all right."

"Hold on to that thought - and come back to me and our child."

He held her tight, it was the first sign that the listlessness was lifting.

On the next morning, he had risen before she was awake. She was startled to find him standing beside the bed, he was cradling their son. Michael looked drawn and haggard, but there was more life in his eyes. The baby was howling.

"He needs you."

She took the child and placed him at the breast. Over his head, she eyed her husband.

"You look better, my darling."

"A little perhaps - I still feel as if I'm moving very slowly through a fog. It takes me so much time to respond to the simplest question."

"I'm sure it will pass, Michael."

"I want to go back to Megiddo!"

"Are you sure that is wise? Perhaps, in a few days - "

The answer was abrupt.

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"No - today! It must be today!"

"It isn't a good place to be, Michael! It isn't healthy - the dead are being moved - "

"Moved!?"

"They must be buried - there is a threat of disease. It was one of the decisions we had to make for the good of the living."

Michael seemed to lose his motivation. He sat on the side of the bed and stared at the floor.

"Where are they being buried?"

"In the Valley of Abarim."

He shuddered, she could see that his hands were shaking.

"Georgi as well?"

"Georgi in particular!"

He was quiet for a long time.

"The purification of the Land of Israel - the cleansing of the land from the satanic host!"

"Ezekiel tells us that it must be done!"

Michael nodded and whispered.

"I am distressed for thee my brother Jonathan: very pleasant thou hast been unto me - "

Leah stared at him and dared not interrupt the flow of words. He turned to her abruptly.

"You asked me what we should name our son."

"Traditionally, a father names his son - especially his first born son - but leave it for another time."

"Now, is a good time - the right time, we've left it too long."

"I suppose you want to call him - Jonathan?"

She bent her head over the baby. He couldn't see her face.

"Jonathan is dead - and so is David! Georgi called it calculated playacting on the last occasion we met. He said that he knew it was a ploy, which I used to try to come closer to him. You see, the relationship we had between us never developed to the degree of that which existed between the original Jonathan and David - that little passage I quoted, it goes on: 'thy love to me was wonderful, passing the love of women'. It was never so between us. Our little play is over! David has died with Jonathan and now we make a new beginning."

"If the baby is not to be Jonathan - then what?"

"A new start - an old name - the oldest of names - if you agree, he shall be - Adam!"

The tears trickled down her face and she couldn't trust herself to speak. She nodded. The animation had returned momentarily to her husband's face, now it was dying away. It was a new start for him too, but it would be a long journey before he became the Michael he had once been and there would be many setbacks along the way. Adam had finished his feed. His needs were simple and uncomplicated. To be nourished, to be clean, to be comfortable. When these conditions were satisfied, there was contentment.

Michael did not return to the Plain of Esdraelon on that day, nor for many days to come. He remained in the small house in the outer suburb of Jerusalem and made no effort to visit the Administration Secretariat. Leah made certain to keep him informed of the decisions which she was making in

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his name. He showed interest, rousing himself for shorter or longer periods to express approval and once or twice, to make a suggestion, but he would once more lapse back into the vague, dreamlike status in which he appeared to take refuge.

Leah tried every ploy she could devise, making sure that he was exposed to the children and that he was left in charge of the baby. He seemed to come to life with them, joining in their games with a patience he had never shown before. He loved to take charge of his son and when he was alone with Leah, it was hard to believe that he suffered from any disability. To the rest of the world, he had simply closed the door and it was increasingly left to Leah to Administer his stewardship.

### 54.

Eli Benjamin had mixed feelings, as he lifted the Shuttle from the landing place close to the temporary Administration Headquarters. He had been left little opportunity to manoeuvre at the meeting to which he had been summoned. Leah had been flanked by a cohort of Michael's top advisors, who firmly established the pecking order between themselves and a junior captain of the Defence Militia.

His invitation to attend had been unexpected and he had made haste to excuse himself from the unpleasant duty of shifting the remains of the dead from the Plain of Esdraelon to the remote Valley of Abarim, in the hills of Moab. It was a task in which he had been engaged for eleven days. During that time, he was nearly driven to distraction by the lack of news from Jerusalem.

The communication links with the Administrative Centre had still not been restored. The comet was still exerting a disruptive influence of the Earth's magnetosphere, it was impossible to bounce radio signals in the usual way. The request to attend the meeting had been conveyed by a special shuttle which provided the only link.

He had been the only man of military rank to attend. In his experience, that was out of the ordinary, usually such conferences were either attended by a cohort of military men, or their civilian counterparts - only on rare occasions was a mixture of both. Eli felt a little apprehensive, it was surely even more strange that he was the only Militia representative.

Another anomaly, was the late arrival of Saul, his brother. The lateness of his coming was in itself nothing unusual, Saul had an irritating habit of never being on time for anything, which outraged his younger brother's fetish for punctuality. The unusual factor was the fact that he had been invited to attend in the first place. Saul was not even on the Council of Advisors, being quite simply an academic who buried himself in the obscurity of tracking flight paths for the now defunct Suborbiter System.

The meeting had been short and to the point. Clearly, the decisions had been made in advance and Eli and Saul were not expected to contribute, other than to comply with the request which was put to them by Leah. Eli had been watching her. She looked very tired - but she was also very much in

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command. He would have liked a moment alone with her to enquire about Michael, but it was avoided. Rumours were sweeping through the Militia. The most outrageous was that Michael was dead. Almost equally outrageous was the one which stated emphatically, that he was totally insane and confined to the cellars of the Administration headquarters.

Leah interrupted his reverie, looking at him directly for the first time.

"Captain Benjamin, I am so glad that you could come and I am sure you will be able to help us with our problem."

Eli jerked upright and stammered.

"In any way that I can be of service, sister Leah."

She smiled gently and turned to Saul.

"My welcome includes you too, brother Saul - "

Saul shuffled and inclined his head. Leah continued.

"The Council of Advisors has agreed that we must determine the extent of the damage caused by the comet's transit. Our future commerce with our neighbours and the viability of our croplands and those of neighbouring Administrations, must be determined. We have gathered reports from the Egyptian Border in the south to the River Orontes in the north, from our coast on the Eastern Basin, to the wheatland belt in Arabia. We know what we face within our own boundaries, but we have no idea of the situation beyond them.

We have already sent a shuttle crew to the east, to conduct an intensive survey. Now, we would ask you both to make a similar journey to the west. Effectively, we would like you to assess the conditions around the Eastern and Western Basins of the Great Sea, together with the coastal lands to north and south. We must be sure that there is no effectual residue of Gog's army in North Africa and if possible, to determine the status of our ally, Joshua Aristides.

It is our sincere hope that you are prepared to undertake this commission, brothers!"

Eli felt the watchful weight of the Council of Advisors. For the most part, they were elderly men who had grouped themselves around Leah in a protective huddle. He felt a little resentful, they had no reason to believe it was necessary to protect her from him - or from Saul, for that matter. He glanced across to his brother. Saul looked as startled as he felt.

"I am at your disposal, sister Leah."

She smiled again and looked at Saul.

"We need a scientific assessment, brother Saul - it could be a unique opportunity for you to measure the effect of the comet's transit."

Eli laughed within himself, but he kept a straight face. Leah knew just where to touch the button of enthusiasm where his brother was concerned. Saul jerked into a vigorous nod of agreement. Leah's smile broadened, she added gently.

"We had hoped you could start immediately."

It was, at one and the same time, a command and a gesture that the meeting was at an end. Thus it was, that Eli found himself piloting his brother away from Leah's home, not having had the chance to talk to her privately and being in no way wiser as to Michael's condition. Saul cleared his throat. Eli winced, he felt sure he was about to be treated to a homily from his considerably older brother.

"What's the matter, brother dear, got some of the comet's dust caught

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in your throat?"

"I had hoped we would manage to keep this enforced intimate contact at a civil level, Eli!"

"I was perfectly civil! I was simply enquiring after your health, brother Saul."

"I was about to make the observation that we had better have a plan of action, rather than randomly circling the city of Jerusalem."

"Speak on, dear brother!"

Saul glared at him.

"I can see that the meeting didn't go according to your wishes, Eli - however, it is surely no reason to act like a petulant child!"

The shuttle rocked a little, Saul closed his mouth into a tight line.

"Perhaps, we had better take a look at the site of the earthquake and then work south along the line of the Rift Valley."

Eli was interested despite himself.

"I hope you're not going to talk in technical jargon for the duration of the mission. Explain! What is the Rift Valley?"

"It is the line of a geological fault, which is a weakness in the earth's crust. Amongst my colleagues, there is a theory that the impact of a large piece of comet debris, in some other part of the world, set up a resonance through the Earth's crust, which found its expression along the valley of the Jordan and extended to the Mount of Olives. Measurements indicate that Olivet split and moved to the north and to the south along the fault line."

"And it is supposed to be part of this Rift Valley?"

"The Rift Valley extends along the basin of the Jordan and the Salt Sea, through the site of Sodom and Gomorrah, down the Gulf of Aqaba and the Red Sea and through into East Africa. It is a major line of weakness in the Earth's crust."

"I thought our commission was to explore the Great Sea, now you talk about going to East Africa!"

"I said we would work south from the site of the earthquake. We will then cross over the Red Sea into Egypt. Would you like me to draw a map, or do you think you could find the way without getting lost!?"

Eli grinned suddenly, he was beginning to relax - and it was good to be back on sparring terms with his stuffshirt brother.

They were already over the great cleft which had been torn into the contour of the Mount of Olives. Eli caused the Shuttle to hover and Saul peered out of one of the side windows.

"The new valley extends to the north and the south for quite a way. I suspect that we shall find the whole Jordan Valley disrupted - See, they're already trying to make a way from Jerusalem into the Judaeen Hills - but it isn't our task to reassess what has already been reported. We also know that the surface of the Salt Sea has been disturbed and that the River Jordan is spilling precious fresh water into the salt - that will be an early priority, I should think. Head south, Eli, along the Gulf and then across the Red Sea."

Eli touched the controls and they made a rapid transit of the Salt Sea and the land over which Gubkin had led his troops on the first raid into Edom. He slowed the ship as he approached the Gulf of Aqaba. There was little to be seen, other than that the city of Elat had been wrecked. Saul murmured.

'Mountains shall be torn up, the terraced hills collapse and every wall

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crash to the ground'

He explained.

"Ezekiel! - I wonder which other cities we shall find in ruins."

"Doesn't that depend on the extent of the tremors?"

"We haven't seen the full extent of the rain of debris from the tail yet - "

"Have you seen Esdraelon."

Eli's voice was controlled, almost casual. Saul shook his head.

"I felt no pressing need to see the scene of carnage!"

"Perhaps you should! We can make a detour on the way home - then you will surely see the full extent of what was unleashed by our cosmic visitor."

Saul glanced at the clenched jaw muscles. He said gently.

"I had heard that you were involved with the burials."

"Perhaps I should have flown you over Abarim! We've cut a great gash in the bed of the valley. We are laying the bodies one on top of the other in a monstrous mass grave - even then, I wonder if there will be room enough to take them all - There is a constant shuttle service, day and night - and not only from Esdraelon, but from Sharon and other places where there was a concentration of the invaders - it doesn't seem to matter how many we move, there are still more."

"Then - you can be happy that you have a respite from it - Ezekiel also says that the first burials will take seven months to complete."

Eli grimaced.

"Can you imagine in what condition the corpses will be at the end of that time? Luke Belin told me that Michael ben Levi went down into the valley on the morning after the burial. He told me that he hasn't been the same man since. I tell you frankly, Saul - I wanted to stay in Jerusalem and help Leah - I have no enthusiasm for doing a grand tour of the Mediterranean!"

"But yet, it was Leah who asked you to do so - and from my observation, she is surrounded by very anxious Advisors."

Eli snorted.

"You chose the right word, Saul - surrounded! She needs protecting from her protectors, if you ask me!"

Saul hesitated.

"And, you see yourself as the one to offer that protection, Eli? Tell me, who would protect her from your protection?"

The shuttle rocked again and Saul closed his mouth. Eli was glaring ferociously into the clear skies above the Red Sea. He set course down the Gulf, there was no obvious sign of anything unusual. Saul broke the silence.

"Perhaps we could save some time and head directly for Nile City."

"What do you expect to find there?"

"I don't know, Leah was interested to know the condition in the neighbouring Administrations - Nile City seems to be the obvious place to start - and it also had a large concentration of Malenski's army."

Eli glanced sideways.

"You still call it Malenski's army - I thought we were dealing with Gog's Horde."

"Old habits die hard, perhaps."

The Shuttle was subjected to a degree of turbulence and Eli had to concentrate on the driving.

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"There's always disturbance when we fly anywhere near to Sinai."

"Perhaps we should remove our shoes, we are passing over holy ground! I understand much the same sort of phenomenon is experienced when flying over Mount Ararat."

"What has that to do with turbulence?"

"Possibly nothing at all - but Ararat was the point where the ark came to rest after the flood and it was from there that Japheth, the father of Magog started on his journey of colonisation. We are dealing with Magog as well as Gog, you know."

"You have me thoroughly confused, Saul!"

"In my experience, brother, that isn't difficult!"

Eli closed his mouth in a tight line and covered the distance to Nile City at increased speed. Even before they crossed the coast, they could see the pall of smoke which blackened the sky ahead. Saul murmured.

'Alas, alas for the great city, the mighty city of Babylon! In a single hour your doom was struck!'

He earned an answer.

"Perhaps I should remind you that we're approaching Nile City - not Babylon! - Or do you want me to draw YOU a map!"

"I was speaking figuratively, Eli! Actually, I always felt a certain comparison between the two. Nile City was always too sophisticated - too worldly - too greedy - and altogether too prosperous, for my taste - "

Eli sniffed.

"For your taste, perhaps - I always liked taking my leave there. Jerusalem has always struck me as a good place to go to pray - or to be buried - it didn't have many other attractions."

"It didn't - but now it does?"

Eli ignored him, instead he pointed ahead.

"What a mess!"

Nile City had had a population of thirty million. It had been a city of towering structures, carefully planned around attractive parks and gardens. In the centuries of the Kingdom of Peace, it had spread to both banks of the Nile and many bridges had linked the two sections. In their first fly pass, it became obvious that the damage was selective. Some of the towers in the administrative centre were still blazing, others were smouldered wrecks, with great chunks blasted out of their structure. Here and there, one had fallen, bringing down its neighbour, or was leaning against it, like two drunks supporting one another.

In contrast, large areas of the city were apparently untouched and it was hard to believe that anything could disturb their tranquillity. Saul touched his brother's arm, indicating a site to one side, just south of the city.

"That was Micah Perga's headquarters."

They eyed it soberly. It was a total ruin and their passing disturbed great flocks of birds which had settled in the wreckage. Eli shuddered involuntarily.

"It isn't hard to guess what they are doing!"

"I suppose it was where Malenski established his headquarters too, and left someone in charge - it would have been the most logical place - and it would have been the base for a large contingent of his forces."

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"If ever we needed evidence to tell us that the debris from the comet was utilised for a special purpose, this must be it."

Saul looked at him quickly.

"Was it ever in doubt?"

"I suppose, when you're too close to the action - as I have been, it's a little too close to form an objective opinion. Every one has been telling us that the comet served a Godly purpose - but it takes something like this to bring it home. I suppose you are going to ask me to land?"

"Not here - and not back in Nile City - it isn't our brief. I think we should content ourselves with an aerial survey and keep out of trouble."

"They might need our help!"

"We are two men and one shuttle. We have no idea what would face us if we put our toe on the ground - It would serve no useful purpose to be murdered - or to find ourselves imprisoned - or to lose the shuttle!"

If he expected an argument, it was not forthcoming. They turned back to surveying the city from a low altitude. Their passing brought out a large number of the survivors. It was hard to see if they were hostile or otherwise. A few arms were waved frantically and some started to race along the ground in a futile attempt to keep up with them. Saul said softly.

"I hope you see what I mean - they hope we're going to land and they want to be there when we do!"

"At least, we can report that some have survived and that the Command Centre for the invaders appears to have been knocked out. They are in no worse condition than the people of Jerusalem."

"That conclusion, I suggest, is the extent of our mission - now we must look elsewhere."

They left Nile City behind them and flew low over the delta. It was in flood and the reason soon became obvious. Most of the irrigation network had been ruptured and when they came to the critical pumping station which was intended to divert the river waters from flowing through its old channels into the Great Sea, it was a shattered ruin. Saul sucked in his breath as they followed the flood northward to the old coastline. The polders which had been reclaimed around the Eastern Basin, were now awash with a torrent of water which was flooding down unchecked, to pour over new waterfalls into the saline waters.

"This is disastrous, Eli!"

Saul sounded as if he was about to burst into tears. He went on.

"It took two centuries to establish the irrigation system and to ensure that the Nile didn't swell the waters of the Eastern Basin. The fresh water was diverted to the west, partially to serve reclaimed desert areas. The loss of productivity will be staggering and I am afraid there will be lean times ahead for us all! The other concern is the volume of water which is flooding into the Eastern Basin. If the sea level is raised to any great extent, the polders around the Greek islands will be under threat. The Mediterranean is a co-ordinated system, if any one part of it is disrupted, the whole is threatened."

"And this is only one problem!"

"Precisely, we have no idea what to expect on the northern shores - or even to the west."

"Then, I suggest we had better find out in a hurry and report back to Leah as soon as possible!"

"You are right, of course, but I am beginning to wonder what can be

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done in the short term. The work of a thousand years is under threat and I can't imagine that we will have the resources to make repairs in the limited time we have before there is irreparable damage."

It was already well into the day, the sun was already setting behind a bank of dark cloud. The comet was much lower in the sky, but its light was still sufficient to create an aura of unreality around that which they had been inspecting."

"It's hard to believe that this has really happened. In a few short hours, the work of centuries has been erased as if it had never existed."

"We must hold on to the memory that it did exist, Eli. If we let go, it will become a fantasy and we will convince ourselves that it will be impossible to recover."

"How can we be sure that we can? Armageddon has passed - except for the inevitable cleansing. How long do you think we have, Saul? At any time, in a moment, the human race might be called to stand before the Throne of God and account for every thought, word and deed. I wonder if we are being shown the futility of human effort. The mighty works of man can be swept away in a single hour - as you so graphically quoted a short time ago. Perhaps, all we will be given is a little time to contemplate and to prepare ourselves for the inevitable."

Saul laughed softly.

"I do believe, little brother, that you are going to become a philosopher! I thought I was supposed to be the dreamer in the family! Now, don't get on your high horse, I wasn't making fun of you! There's a great deal of truth in what you say, but before we make a profound judgement, I think we should take a further look at - what did you call them - the mighty works of man! Let us see what remains, perhaps we are being unduly pessimistic. After all, we are still very close to the epicentre of the disturbance - at least for this locality. I must admit, however, that if the resonance theory holds, there might well be equal or greater disruption along whole of the Mediterranean Basin."

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Old Alexandria was a scene of devastation even greater than that of Nile City.

"It's to be expected, Eli - Malenski had a large concentration of his militia in this area, it was also a reception point for supplies."

"Our Central Command heard that the civilian population had been expelled from the city. Malenski commandeered all accommodation and facilities - the inhabitants were left to fend for themselves in the countryside - it was his way of punishing them for daring to try to resist his advance. The lesson proved effective, Nile City capitulated without an arrow being shot - but it still didn't prevent the Scandians and other more ruthless elements, from taking their promised reward.

"They earned for themselves another reward - the almost total devastation of the city and everyone living in it. I doubt whether many survived the fire storm."

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The city was still a fiery ruin, nothing had been done to quench the flames in certain areas. They flew over the main Terminal, Eli gave a soft, incredulous whistle.

"Will you look at that!"

Huge transporters lay shattered on the ground, where they had toppled during the earth tremors. Their skins were punctured with larger or smaller penetrations. Some had burned out, all appeared to be wrecked beyond repair. Smaller craft had been thrown around as if they had been physically handled. On the edge of the landing area, others had crashed during a mad panic to fly out in the face of the hail of fire. It would have been a suicidal attempt. There were far fewer people about. They stared listlessly towards the low flying shuttle, but didn't raise their arms as they had in Nile City. Saul murmured.

"They look totally cowed - they don't even bother to plead for help!"

They left the landing field behind and headed west along the coast. Below them, the same scene of devastation greeted them - kilometre upon kilometre. In some places, the walls holding back the saline Eastern Basin from the agricultural polders, were broken down and the reclaimed land, was in turn, being reclaimed as part of the sea bed. Saul muttered again.

"I thoroughly depressing picture. I grow more and more pessimistic with every kilometre we cover."

"Then, it must be time for us to set down somewhere and get some sleep - we can't have you lapsing into terminal melancholia!"

"It's no laughing matter, Eli! I don't think you appreciate the gravity of what we are seeing. Millions will starve when the storehouses are empty!"

"Perhaps they're already empty. Gog has conquered and stripped everything there was to be had - of that you can be sure! Now, let's find a nice, quiet spot, where you won't frighten the wild life with your snoring!"

"I doubt whether you will find a quiet enough spot for us to land. There must be bands of desperate people roaming the countryside, even this far out from the major towns."

"I can't fly this thing night and day - and, in any case, we can't see much by comet light."

"There won't be much comet light, as you put it - the Earth and the comet are now moving on diverging paths - "

"With the comet never to return - I sincerely hope."

"Of that we can't be certain - but we must certainly hope for the best. Much will depend on the direction it will take when it goes around the Sun."

"Assuming that it will go around the Sun and not through it!"

"Assumptions are all we have, Eli."

"Does it mean that we're out of danger from the tail?"

"I believe the Earth has just about emerged from the tail - but that doesn't mean that we're out of danger. I predict continual meteor showers for some time to come. A great deal of debris has been left behind - and a great deal of disturbance has taken place to some of the orbital paths of the larger asteroids tracking around us."

Eli looked at him sharply.

"You are saying that we're in constant danger of being hit over the head by some random piece of rock - should it happen to make us a target!?"

"In crude terms - yes."

"How very reassuring!"

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"I thought it would increase your confidence!"

"Enough to make me set this crate down by the seashore! If I'm going to be brained by something, it might just as well be by someone's club, as a piece of rock from the bright blue sky!"

"Whatever you say, Eli - whatever you say."

Eli concentrated on setting the shuttle down close to a line of dikes which was still holding back the smooth waters of the Eastern Basin. At this point, the polder system stretched some way out from the old coast and there was no sign of habitation close at hand. It was as good a place as any to risk a stopover for the night. With any good fortune, no one would have noticed their descent. Saul stepped out into a field of early rape seed. The descent of the shuttle had flattened an already damaged crop. On all sides, there were traces of a spray of meteorite fragments, which were half buried in the rich soil. Eli joined him.

"They received a heavy bombardment here."

Eli glanced nervously at the darkening sky.

"Perhaps it wasn't such a good place to chose."

"It's no good looking upward, I'm told on good authority, that you never hear the one that hits you! Just show a little trust, little brother!"

Saul sniffed the air appreciatively, it was salt laden, sticky to the skin, he filled his lungs.

"We should sleep well to night - out here, if you agree - close to the door, if you're nervous!"

Eli eyed his brother suspiciously, he was showing a disconcerting, adventurous streak. Saul continued blithely.

"I'm glad to get out of that stuffy ship."

"I wasn't aware that you had a complaint about the recycling system."

"Don't be so quick to leap to the defence of your war horse!"

"If I didn't know better, I'd say that you've been hitting the bottle - "

"Now - there's a good old-fashioned expression! Almost classical idiom of the decades before the Great Destruction - there's hope for you yet!"

"I'm so glad - I'm going to get my bed roll - keep a good lookout, otherwise you might find yourself on the wrong end of a Scandians sword!"

"It will never happen - I have you to defend me!"

"Don't count on it - I might be tempted to sell you to the highest bidder!"

Eli vanished into the shuttle, Saul grinned and stared up into the darkening sky. It was growing dark quickly and even the comet's glow was now subdued, not much more than a faint halo on the north western horizon. The first stars were appearing. He looked at them intently, until he was startled by a soft touch on his shoulder. He wheeled around and glared into the grinning face of his brother.

"Scandians have been known to move that softly - they're like cats in the dark!"

"If I hear one purring, I'll be sure to let you know!"

Eli set down his bed roll and a couple of self heating containers. He said over his shoulder.

"Your rations are inside - Just remember that they have to last ten days - possibly more."

Saul smiled. Eli was making the point that his brother could expect to fend for himself - there were no servants on this trip.

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Eli had doused the lights of the ship.

"They can be seen for ten kilometres in this sort of country."

"There will be no moon tonight - just the stars."

"That's good, we should be free of interruptions - unless someone saw us land."

They ate their meal and then relaxed back on their beds. Saul pointed upward to a shower of shooting stars.

"I told you that there would be increased activity."

"Don't remind me! I prefer my stars to remain where they are - up there!"

"We can't even be sure of that anymore."

Eli turned on his side and stared at him.

"The stars are moving!?"

"Nothing is stationary in the universe - everything moves in relation to something else."

"You sound like a teacher I had one hundred and fifty years ago."

"There are some who suggest that the stars are not even there. That all we see is the image of what once existed. They say that everything is an illusion. They talk about the passage in Isaiah where it says: 'All the host of heaven shall crumble into nothing, the heavens shall be rolled up like a scroll, and the starry host fade away'. There is something similar in Revelation: 'The stars in the sky fell to the earth, like figs shaken down in a gale; the sky vanished, as a scroll is rolled up, and every mountain and island was moved from its place.'"

Eli's response was schooled into steadiness in the darkness.

"Are you suggesting that this is what is about to happen - the heavens are going to vanish and suddenly, the earth will be flattened by some incredible force!?"

"I suggest nothing - I am merely repeating what some of my contemporaries have to say. There is a great deal of speculation about what will happen when we come to the End of Time."

"You mean the Second Resurrection and the Last Judgement."

"That is the End of Time, is it not? Those events are all that remain."

Eli was silent for a while.

"You talk about the heavens rolling up - is that feasible - is there any evidence? Surely, we should start to see it happening?"

"Is it feasible - yes, if one follows one strand of theoretical physics. Tell me, Eli, have you ever heard of the Cosmic Egg?"

"Vaguely - it's some crazy theory about recurring creation, isn't it? Something about all matter being concentrated into one impossible mass, which cannot support itself, and which explodes outward, expelling the material, which eventually coalesces into galaxies, stars and planets, and so on - eventually, everything starts to fall back on itself - to converge into the impossible concentration - and the whole thing happens again - ad infinitum!"

"I'm impressed! Our father was of the opinion that not much went through your thick skull - he would be delighted to be proved wrong!"

"Cut the wise cracks! What has this to do with the heavens rolling up - OH!"

"Precisely - Oh! If we extend the argument to accept that the Act of Creation was one of these massive explosions - what some have called the Big Bang - then, by the same argument, the explosive force would have

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propelled matter outward and would have formed the universe - there would have come a time when it started its journey inward again, to form another impossible agglomeration - the heavens rolling up like a scroll, perhaps?"

"Wait a moment! We have always been taught that the universe is still expanding - that flattens your theory."

"Not at all! The vision of distant stars and galaxies which we see today, are no more than pictures of actual happenings many millions of years into the past. It takes that amount of time for those images to reach our eyes. The image of what is actually happening today, will not reach the Earth for another million years. It might well be that the heavens are already rolling up like a scroll, but we will never know - the image of it cannot reach us. This answers your second question. We will not start to see it happening. We will not see stars 'going out' one after the other. Here is one more fact. If the Sun was to cease to shine from one moment to the next, we would not be aware of it for eight more minutes, it would take that length of time for the image of that event to reach us!"

"It sounds like theoretical physics gone mad!"

"Possibly! On the other hand, it cannot be disproved. As I said earlier, it is only one point of view. There is also the belief that the Act of Creation was an instantaneous expulsion of the universe from the Hand of God in one moment of time and that all things have continued from that time without undue alteration. The same belief suggests that when the physical creation is brought to an end, Our Father will take back into His Hand, that which He placed into existence by His Hand - and that in this way, all that was created, will cease to be. In my view, there is not a great deal of difference between the two explanations - other than the time scale - and time means nothing to Our Heavenly Father."

Eli was silent for some time, Saul wondered if he had gone to sleep. His supposition was proved wrong.

"In your first proposition, doesn't that mean that the Earth would be the last thing to physically cease to exist? Everything will be extinguished all around us, the stars, the Sun and the Moon in that order, because the stars are further than the Sun, which in turn, is further away than the Moon - I suppose, some of the planets would go before others, depending on what side of the Sun they are in relation to the Earth - "

"Don't let us get carried away! Your premise only holds true if you believe the Ptolemaic view of the universe, which supposes that the Earth is the centre of all things - and this has been proved to be patently untrue. The Earth has been described as a small planet, orbiting a minor star on the edge of a spiral arm of an insignificant galaxy. In fact, it has always been the basis of an argument of those who have wanted to eliminate God from the scheme of things. These people have always tried to suggest that Our Father would hardly base His entire Plan of Salvation in such an unlikely setting!

To answer your question: No, the condensing inward into the hypothetical cosmic egg, would not be centred on the Earth. Man, in all his wisdom, has not yet, been able to pinpoint the exact location of the Big Bang - that is, the centre of the physical universe - but it most certainly is not the Earth!"

There was another display of a meteor shower in the southern sky. Eli growled.

"Those things are making me nervous!"

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"Then, shut your eyes and pretend they are not here! You might go to sleep and never know if one hits you!"

"Good night, Saul!"

"Good night, little brother - sweet dreams!"

Eli rolled on to his side and Saul grinned into the darkness. He watched the slowly moving heavens and began to understand how once, man had imagined himself to the centre of the universe. It was easy to position oneself into believing that everything revolved around the Earth - the Sun, the Moon and the stars. It must have been a culture shock for their remote ancestors, to be told that they were no more than a very small pebble on a very large beach. Perhaps, that knowledge had provoked the frenetic activity to blast off into space to explore other worlds - well, the First Resurrection and the Great Destruction which had followed, had put an end to those pipe dreams.

Eventually, he slept. For the first time in many nights, he was free of dreams and when he woke in the early light of the following day, he felt a great deal fresher than might have been expected after spending a night on the hard ground. Eli was already moving around and showing uncharacteristic consideration for his sleeping brother. Saul sat up abruptly, to be thrust down with a hand clamped over his mouth. Eli stared into his eyes to ensure he was awake before releasing his grip.

"Get back into the ship - we have visitors and they're no more than a kilometre away!"

Saul gathered up his bedroll without another word and tossed it in through the open door. He helped Eli to store the rest of their gear. They both climbed aboard and Saul secured the outer door, whilst his brother gunned the ship into life. He still wasn't secure in his seat when they lifted off. Through the door window, he could see that Eli had not been wrong. A small group of men were heading in their direction. As soon as they saw the vessel rise, they abandoned all attempts for a stealthy approach. A volley of arrows shot skyward, but the shuttle was already well out of range. Eli muttered.

"An unfriendly lot! They deserve a similar reply!"

Saul joined him at the controls and shook his head.

"Remember the injunction in scripture: 'As soft answer turns away wrath!' Besides, I never tried to shoot a bow an arrow through the metal wall of a shuttle. I doubt if the outcome would be encouraging!"

Eli grinned slowly.

"Well, you have something else to add to your report - the natives are definitely not friendly!"

Saul opened another of the ration packs. He looked upon it with disfavour.

"This is a repeat of last evening's meal."

"Our quartermaster is a man of limited imagination - and even less culinary skill."

"My digestion isn't what it once was."

"That's advancing years, Saul - your age is catching up with you."

"In which case, you should treat me with respect!"

Eli hooted with laughter.

"Remind me to help you to cross the road, the next time we're in Jerusalem!"

Saul thrust a plate of food into his lap.

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"When you've finished with the wisecracks - perhaps you will point this thing to the west!"

Eli gave a mock salute.

"If you say so, sir - Might I point out that the sun is behind us - it is close to dawn - so logically, we are already heading westward!"

Saul concentrated on his food.

"What alerted you to the danger, back there?"

"A fortuitous call of nature - "

"I thought it might have been nasty dreams about being chased by meteors."

"How far to the west do you intend to go?"

"You heard our instructions - we are to try to contact Joshua Aristides and find out the situation in the West European Administration. We must also find out the extent of the damage to the north and the south of the Mediterranean."

"According to my calculations, we're about half way along the North African coast. So far, I haven't see anything encouraging. The croplands appear to be wrecked and towns in ruins. The polders are leaking sea water like a sieve."

"Which, in itself, is disturbing."

The banter had gone out of his tone, Eli glanced sideways at him.

"Why disturbing? Surely, we can expect some damage, the meteor showers were not all that selective."

"I agree and I disagree - I agree that the meteor showers were general, with a wide, central band which I suspect was in the region of two thousand kilometres. We know that the comet approached the Earth from the south-east and that its orbital track took it to the north-west. The main concentration of meteor strikes occurred during a period of three to four hours, therefore we could expect the path of destruction to be roughly south-east to north-west and I have calculated it to be about two and a half thousand kilometres in width. I believe the centre of the band was roughly under the comet, which, as we know, passed directly over Jerusalem and the Plain of Esdraelon. If we accept this, the intensity of meteor strikes would be for a twelve hundred kilometres on either side. This will include the valley of the Nile and much of the North African coast, with a corresponding area in Europe."

Eli murmured.

"That means the land of Magog - Anatolia and southern Russia, Greece and the Balkans, Italy and then, the northern provinces of the West European Administration - "

"Which had already fallen to the Scandians, according to the last reports."

"You said you were disturbed by the condition of the dikes. Isn't it to be expected?"

Saul stared ahead.

"I am concerned about the rising waters in the Eastern Basin. The dikes are damaged but I fear that it doesn't account for the rise in water level."

"We've seen the breaches in the dams in the delta of the Nile - and it's quite conceivable that the damage to the European irrigation systems is just as severe. Think of the Danube, the Dneiper, the Don - there's dozens of

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large rivers which might be pouring uncontrolled into the Eastern Basin - Until we take a look, we can only guess."

"You might be right, Eli - I hope so."

Eli looked at him sharply.

"You hope I'm right that the irrigation systems are broken down!?"

"I hope it isn't something worse - for instance, that the Gibraltar Dam has not been damaged!"

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About two thirds of the way along the North African coast, Saul asked his brother to change course to the north. It coincided with the completion of the crossing of the ancient Gulf of Sirte and having the Tunisian mountain ranges dead ahead. Eli raised an enquiring eyebrow.

"I suppose you realise that this would be about the limit of Micah Perga's Administration? Joshua Aristides's responsibility starts just beyond those mountains. I would have thought it to be a good place to take a closer look - the last reports were to the effect that Malenski hadn't crossed over them, preferring to avoid entanglements with Joshua's defenders."

"Correction - they were the last reports we received and would be some days old. The situation may well have changed. I take your point, however - but my interest is the land bridge."

"The link between Europe and Africa, you mean? I often wonder why it was ever called a land bridge, to my way of thinking, it was never more than an open expanse of treacherous swamp, which even made Pik Sedova have second thoughts."

"Or, Georgi Malenski - whichever version of the story you prefer."

"So, why the interest?"

"If there is any place to show us if the water level of the Eastern Basin has increased, it will be there. Your treacherous swamp will have become a shallow lagoon!"

Eli wheeled the shuttle to the north and followed the old coast. At first glance, the dikes along the reclaimed land adjacent to the Tunisian shore were holding and there was little evidence that the saline waters had penetrated.

"It looks good so far - "

"On the face of it yes."

"Does pessimism come with age?"

"Perhaps - but prudence replaces the impetuosity of youth!"

Dead ahead, was the mountain of Pantellaria. Eli eyed it with caution. The last reports indicated that it was still held by the forces who had been loyal to Micah Perga, but much could have changed in the meantime. If there was any point where they might be challenged, it was here. He wasn't quite sure what he would do, or could do, if he was confronted with an order to

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land. Saul said quietly:

"Veer away from the mountain. I am quite sure we have attracted their attention, but we should not appear provocative."

"I have no desire to appear provocative! As far as I am concerned, we started to appear provocative when we altered course to the north!"

"You are being petulant again!"

"Take a quick look at what you want to see - and let's get out of here!"

Saul was studying the surface below.

"Can't you bring us down lower?"

"We are not a sail boat!"

"I have the utmost confidence in your skills to prevent that from happening."

Eli slowed the shuttle to a crawl and hovered just above the surface. Pantellaria seemed to loom over them, although it was fully twenty kilometres distant. There was no sign of life. The structures on it seemed to be intact and as always, brooding and watchful.

"Get a move on, Saul! I don't like this place!"

"Change course to bring us to the tip of Cape Bon."

"And then what!?"

"Then, we will spy out the land and make a rapid landing to confirm my suspicions!"

Eli's mouth sagged open momentarily and then he shut it into a grim line. He accelerated abruptly and treated his brother to a rough ride to the African shore. Saul said nothing. Eli patrolled along the reclaimed edge of the dikes at the outer edge of the polders.

"I have no intention of going further inland."

"This will be quite satisfactory. I want to take some measurements."

"Is this really necessary!?"

"Do you imagine that I would risk life and limb if it wasn't?"

"I don't really know, Saul - I don't really know."

They flattened a perfectly good garden crop in the corner of one of the polders, it close to the outer dike wall. Saul was out of the shuttle door before the power drive had closed down. Eli raised his eyes to the ceiling and watched his brother scramble up the inner side of the dike and stand on the flat access path on the top. Saul stared out into the ocean, quite motionless. Eli gritted his teeth, he was a perfect target for anyone inclined to loose an arrow into his scrawny back.

Saul fell to his knees and peered over the far side, he was less of a target, but appeared in imminent danger of overbalancing into the Western Basin. Eli had calculated by this time, that they were just within its confines. His brother regained his feet, took a sharp look inland and then descended the slope in some haste and regained the shuttle. He bundled in through the door and closed it.

"We have attracted attention, little brother!"

"I'm not in the remotest degree surprised - big brother!"

Eli gunned the ship into life and lifted it away from the soft ground. He headed out over the ruffled waters of the sea. He looked over his shoulder, Saul was still peering out of the window.

"It was a woman with two small children, Eli."

"I hope you are not asking me to go back and rescue them - if so, I refuse!"

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Saul shook his head sorrowfully.

"What frightened people we have become, Eli - in such a short time. In the Kingdom of Peace, it would have been unthinkable for us to have abandoned them."

"We don't know that we have abandoned them - they could have been a decoy, perhaps her husband and fifty brothers were coming up behind - did you think of that?"

"On the other hand, perhaps we were her last hope - did you think of that possibility?"

Eli glared at him.

"Do you want me to go back?"

Saul shook his head again.

"You are right, of course - we can not take the risk."

"Did your little adventure give you the answers you wanted? - Saul, you are completely hopeless when it comes to your own security! You stood there, a perfect target - and advertised our precise position."

"Nothing happened to me - and yes, I did get some answers - and yes, my pessimism has increased. There is a steady and rapid current flowing from the west. That is the opposite to what one might expect if the Gibraltar pumping stations are working as they should. Their task is to evacuate surplus water into the Atlantic - the current is flowing in the wrong direction."

"What does that mean?"

"It means that we had better make a rapid transit to the Gibraltar Dam and then to the Sierra Nevada headquarters of Joshua Aristides!"

In Jerusalem, Leah continued to act as deputy to her ailing husband. Each morning she woke, hoping for the return of the man who had led the Administration with such surety. Without a doubt, there was some improvement, and at times, it was almost as if he had succeeded in breaking free of whatever was binding him, but the glazed expression would return after a while and he would retreat to where she was unable to reach him.

It became impracticable to continue using her home as a temporary headquarters. It was too far away from the Administrative centre and it was there, that Michael's staff tried to wrestle with the queries and problems which flooded in on a daily basis. The whole process of decision slowed to a crawl because it was necessary for messengers to make their way to her home, to and from the Secretariat. On the third morning after Eli and Saul had been despatched on their fact-finding mission, she made up her mind to move herself to the Administration headquarters. The news was greeted with wails of protest from her devoted house staff. She listened patiently and held firm.

"You say that it's too soon after the birthing. You say that the baby is too young to be left. You tell me that he relies on me for feeding. I agree with you all - but I want to remind you that Michael got me out of bed and brought me here one day after the birthing - another short journey across the city by shuttle, will hardly send me or the baby into a rapid decline! The baby comes with me - and so does Michael. The other children can stay here for the time being - you will thoroughly spoil them and they will love it! So, you see, there's no problem - all we need is a little reorganisation."

She had her way and so it was, that by the end of that day, she was firmly ensconced in the centre of Jerusalem, together with Michael and Adam and two house servants. There was even less room in the small apartment which Asher had once used, but they would manage. She looked around the

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well known rooms and could almost imagine Asher watching her and smiling quietly and muttering something about his little tyrant. It was a term Joshua had often used about his mother. She wondered why she should suddenly think about him, but she supposed it was because, by this time, Saul and Eli would be drawing close to the sprawling house in the Sierra Nevada ranges, in the hope that he would be there - that he had survived the visitation of the comet, even if he had survived the onslaught of the Scandians.

After she had greeted the posse of secretaries, who had hovered around to ensure that she was safely established and was once more alone, she realised afresh how hamstrung they were without the communications facilities they had taken for granted for such a long time. Jerusalem could have been an island - the Administration Secretariat itself, could be an island. There were insufficient Shuttles and most of them were dedicated to the task of transporting the corpses of the fallen from various places within Israel, to the burial ground in the Valley of Abarim - or had been despatched on critical missions, like that of Saul and Eli.

They were reduced to sending messages by hand and if she needed to know the position in some more remote area of Israel, by the time the news could be brought to her, it was already outdated. It was an impossible handicap if she wanted to restore the Administration back to where it had been before the advent of the destructive forces of Gog.

It was already late in the afternoon and she was weary. Her staff had tried to insist that she should rest, but they had had to acknowledge defeat. She was not left alone for long, the control pad on the desk illuminated. At least, they were not reduced to walking to the door and calling for attention. She opened the channel.

"Brother Malachi Judah requests a meeting."

She got to her feet and walked to the door - this was one of those occasions when it was justified. She opened the panel and put her hand in his and then led him into the office. He smiled gently and stared intently into her face.

"Greetings, sister Leah - my dear, you look very tired. You must not extend yourself so much. I should not have troubled you at this hour!"

"Greetings, brother Malachi - I am tired, but I am not too tired to see such a valued old friend and helper."

"You are much too kind, my dear - and you overrate me, I think."

"I needed advice - and here you are!"

She led him to a chair close to the window and sat opposite him. He was breathing a little heavily. He smiled ruefully.

"I must say that I find the loss of the Pod system very trying. I suppose it only goes to show how lazy we have become and that we seem to have forgotten how to use the two legs which our God has given us."

"I know what you mean, uncle Malachi - I have had a lot of thoughts about how we are hamstrung by our loss of communications - and our loss of mobility. I can see no answers in the short term."

"I understand the power supply is one of the critical factors?"

She nodded.

"As you know, we have managed to rig an emergency service, but it is barely enough for domestic needs."

Malachi nodded.

"It will take a long time before we are back to normal, I think."

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"I very much doubt if we have that much time, uncle Malachi!"

He watched her resting back in the chair. She was clearly exhausted.

"My dear, you must take a rest. The problems will still be with us tomorrow!"

She laughed.

"You might be surprised at how many people have said the same thing to me today."

"And they are quite right! Nothing is to be gained by you becoming ill - and you have your new child to consider! Forgive an old man the luxury of giving you a well deserved lecture!"

"You are forgiven, uncle Malachi - it reminds me so much of Father Asher."

"I have thought a great deal about him during recent days - I wonder how he would have coped with the current situation."

"He would have been in total command - he and Father Joel - they would have conspired and schemed together and they would have found the answers much more quickly."

"Even they could not have done the impossible - and it is rapidly appearing that the impossible is what we are facing. We simply do not have the resources, so much was destroyed by the hail of fire."

"As I said before, perhaps we will not have enough time to recover completely. Perhaps Our Father has other plans."

"Of that we can be quite sure, daughter! Our Father will soon summons us, but in the meantime, we must do the best we can - just as it was in the days before the First Resurrection, so it will be in the days before the Second - we must occupy until Our Father is satisfied and then, He will call an end to all of our efforts and we shall appear before His Throne!"

They sat in silence for a few minutes. Then, Malachi went on:

"My dear, I came to see you today, firstly to see how you are - and I must say that I do not like what I see! Secondly, I feel it is essential that I speak to Michael!"

Leah sat to attention, she eyed the old man warily.

"Is that really desirable - or even necessary, uncle Malachi? You know how unwell he is."

"Leah - quite frankly, I do not know how unwell he is! Nor do the rest of his advisors. Please! Do not misunderstand me - none of us doubt your word that he is not well enough to perform his duties, but on the other hand, none of us have seen him since the day of the Battle of Armageddon. There are certain matters which only he can address. I have delayed on the particular problem which I wish to place before him, but I am afraid it can no longer be left unresolved."

Leah stared at him and leaned back in her chair.

"What if I was to tell you that you might not even get a response from him? There are times when he seems to fade away into some remote place, where not even I can reach him. Uncle Malachi, I very much doubt if you will get a coherent answer out of him, no matter how urgent your business!"

Despite her control, the tears trickled down her face. Malachi stood and reached down and drew her up from the chair. She cried on his shoulder. It had been a long time coming, but at last, she released her grief. She sobbed.

"It's as if he died at Armageddon and not Gog! I can't understand! He

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was supposed to be victorious, but he has been defeated - but Gog died too - we know that! Michael saw his body - Georgi Malenski. From that time, Michael has been fighting to come to terms with something - perhaps, it is with himself!"

The weeping subsided and the old man held her out at arm's length.

"It is really essential that I see him, my dear Leah! I insist - this is a matter of military discipline and cannot be delayed."

She nodded and wiped her eyes. She was back in control.

"As long as you realise the situation, uncle Malachi. I will take you to him."

She led the way to their communal room. Michael was sitting in front of a roaring fire, staring at the flames.

"Michael - Michael - Malachi Judah has paid us a visit, he wants to talk to you."

Michael looked round slowly and appeared to take some time to come into focus. He rose to his feet and extended his hand in greeting.

"Brother Judah, my dear friend."

Malachi took his hand and held on to it far longer than was required by the act of greeting. He turned to Leah.

"My dear, I would like to talk to the Administrator alone - it is a confidential matter."

Leah nodded reluctantly and made her exit. She closed the door panel on the two men and wondered if she had done the right thing in exposing Michael to the visitor.

Within the room, they sat facing each other.

"We have been worried about you, Michael."

"We?"

"My fellow advisors - your advisors - your illness has given us considerable concern."

There was a flash of the old humour.

"I can assure you, it is giving me some concern, also!"

"Michael - I have a serious matter to put to you, which concerns a senior officer of the Defence Militia. I felt it proper to talk to you. Leah can hardly be expected to give a response to this matter."

Michael appeared to make a great effort to concentrate. He nodded

"Go ahead, Malachi - I'll do what I can."

"Excellent! The problem concerns a man who has deserted his post. As far as we can determine, something happened to him during, or shortly after Armageddon. His fellow officers can't be sure of all the circumstances, but his reaction was to desert the battlefield and abandon his men. He didn't run away in the physical sense, we know exactly where he is to be found, but he refuses to return and take up his responsibilities. Our question to you is this: What punishment should we impose on this character?"

Michael stared at the old man.

"You have no idea of the reasons for his behaviour?"

Malachi shook his head slowly.

"The most we have been able to learn is that something triggered it. It reminded someone of the story of Jonah after he visited Nineveh - perhaps, you will remember. God had threatened to destroy the city and all its inhabitants, but changed his mind. Jonah went out into the desert and was very annoyed at the change of plans. He sat down and waited to die and then

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a small gourd grew around him to shelter him from the blazing sun and he got relief. Then, the gourd died and he lamented over it. God said to Jonah, you lamented over the death of the gourd, but you would rather see Nineveh and all its inhabitants die.

As far as this man's fellow officers can see, he is angry with God because He fulfilled his Plan at Armageddon - and because Gog died!"

Michael stared into Malachi's relentless eyes. The old man went on.

"You should recognise that officer, Michael! It is you! You have fled from the battlefield and refuse to return! You hide at home and let your wife live for you! You appear to be angry with Almighty God for allowing your friend Georgi Malenski to die - and you still refuse to acknowledge that he was Gog - I do not believe you ever acknowledged him to be such! You persisted for a long time, to refuse to recognise the obvious fact. I counsel you, Michael ben Levi - do not provoke Our God your Father! He gave you the victory in a mighty battle - now you must rejoice and be thankful in the victory!"

I want to add another reminder. It concerns your ancestor David. Once he lamented when a battle had been won by his soldiers and his captains complained that he refused to give them credit and encouragement and that the victory was hollow because he wept over the dead. I give you the earnest advice to heed that old story and fall on your knees in thankfulness for the deliverance of the Father, who has shielded Jerusalem, His Holy City and the Camp of the Saints from the evil which Satan attempted through his servant Gog and those who accompanied him!"

The old man rose and towered over his host.

"It may well be, Michael ben Levi, that you will have no further use for me as your advisor. If that is the case, then, so be it. I served Asher, your predecessor, for many decades - and I have served you as loyally. I have never believed an advisor to be a 'yesman'. I had many a battle with Asher when I thought he was acting wrongly and sometimes our discussions were heated. I believe you are acting wrongly. You are sinning against your wife and new son as well as against your responsibilities. Leah and your baby, should be enjoying your adoration at this time, instead, you ignore them, you stare into the fire and Leah struggles to be a new mother and to carry the load you have thrown down. Think on what I have had to say to you, my dear brother Michael - and may Our God bless you!!"

57.

Long before they reached the Gibraltar Dam, it was obvious to Saul and Eli, that something was very wrong. They had turned again to the west and had skirted the Balearic Mountains, which had once been islands in the

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midst of the Mediterranean Sea. They were quickly becoming so again. Eli needed no bidding to bring the shuttle low over the waters. A swiftly flowing current was sweeping past the new islands and the reclaimed land to north and south, was being washed away in a fierce, scouring torrent. It got worse as they moved to the west. Saul had urged a swift transit. The greater priority was to inspect what was happening at the massive construction which had taken so many centuries of toil and which was the main plank of the reclamation of the bed of the ancient sea.

It was when they came within sight of the actual wall, which had been raised across the ancient straits between Europe and Africa, to hold back the relentless pounding of the Atlantic beyond, that the full enormity of the disaster struck home. Eli breathed.

"By all that is holy, will you look at that!"

"I think it would be better said - by all that is unholy! The wall is breached!"

Eli lifted the shuttle to a higher altitude. There was something menacing about approaching the barrier from below its crest and into the face of a white spume of water which gushed through a wide crack in the centre of the upper third of the structure. Saul was muttering a fierce commentary to himself.

"The major part is still intact - and still holding back the ocean. There is no way of telling immediately, the damage which might have been caused to the foundations. The whole structure could be unstable. A fierce storm from the ocean could result in a total collapse. It would appear that they experienced an earthquake here - probably one of the resonances from the meteorite hit - "

Eli had raised the shuttle to cross above the dam. The ocean was pouring through a gap of about two hundred meters, it was impossible to see how deep the gash was below the surface of the water. It looked as if the wall had split and the upper vee portion had either fallen or had been dislodged by the pressure of the Atlantic. He banked the shuttle - there were teams of men working to each side of the gap. He couldn't be sure what they were trying to do. Saul offered a suggestion.

"They are trying to fill the gap - a hopeless task, I am afraid. It would be like trying to pour handfuls of sand into a waterfall with the hope that it would accumulate enough to stop the flow of water."

Eli muttered grimly.

"At least, they are trying to do something!"

"That cannot be denied - my point is that it is a futile effort!"

Eli accelerated the shuttle out over the ocean. To the west, ferocious looking black clouds were building. The men on the dam wall raised their heads to stare up at them as they passed. Then they bent down again to whatever they were trying to accomplish. Eli felt his frustration rising.

"Don't they realise that they will be killed if that storm out there, comes this way and hits the wall? They won't have a chance to get back to the safety of the land, if the dam starts to collapse under them."

"I'm quite certain they are aware of the danger. Someone would have evaluated the risks."

"So - what now? I presume that you haven't got in mind to put the shuttle down and ask after their health?"

"Not over the Atlantic Ocean in any case - but perhaps, on the Iberian

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shore - and our enquiry will be, as to where can we find Joshua Aristides."

Eli was flying along the length of the dam. The only obvious damage was the one location in the centre. The roadway across the top was packed with vehicles moving to and from the actual site of the rupture. Someone was organising the movement of vast quantities of fill from each side of the straits. Saul shook his head.

"Surely, this is the product of desperation. Don't they realise that the circumstances have vastly changed since the dam was first built? The Mediterranean has been pumped out! When they first built the dam, the water level was equal on both sides, then, they had only the oceanic currents with which to contend and they built barriers to deflect them and gradually closed the gap. Now, there is a torrent sweeping through the damaged section - there is not the remotest possibility of plugging it by this method!"

"What method then!?"

Saul shook his head.

"The solution escapes me - perhaps there isn't one!"

"Then, it would see that they are doing the best they can - futile or otherwise. At least, they will be able to say that they tried."

"That only applies if they survive the onset of an oceanic storm and are able to say anything!"

They had reached the Iberian end of the dam wall. There was a hastily constructed camp straggled untidily on the slopes below the great Rock. Eli surveyed the site carefully. Someone had had the elementary common sense to construct the medley of wooden buildings above the level of the ocean. It appeared to be deserted. Eli urged caution.

"We will take a risk if we land - we could meet some very hostile people."

"I very much doubt it. We will more than likely meet tired and dispirited people, who know they are faced with an impossible task."

"Be it on your own head, Saul!"

"And on your, dear brother!"

Eli coaxed the shuttle down on an open space to one side of the camp. It had the appearance of being used for aerial operations. His descent and landing attracted surprisingly little interest. After a while, one man wandered out of a doorway in a small, temporary building to one side of the clearing. He eyed them with little curiosity. Saul descended to the soft ground. Eli remained at the controls.

"Greetings, I am Saul Benjamin from Jerusalem."

The man's eyes widened a little and then narrowed to slits.

"Greetings - Paul Vitas - from Cordoba - you're a long way from home."

"We have a message for Joshua Aristides, can you tell me where he is?"

The man scratched his chin.

"That depends - "

"On what?"

"It depends on the message - and it depends who sent you to look for him."

"The message is for Joshua - and for him only - and the sender is Michael ben Levi!"

A few more men had emerged from the building. They stood in a casual semicircle around the shuttle. They were armed with short swords.

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"What if I was to tell you that he isn't here?"

"Then, we will go on our way and find someone who does know where he is!"

"I didn't say I didn't know where he was, friend."

Saul drew in his breath.

"And I haven't got time to waste playing games - friend! I will remember your name when I finally meet your Administrator!"

Vitas fingered the stubble on his chin.

"Have it your way - try his headquarters - if you know where that is?"

"No doubt, it is where Leah Steinbecker paid him a visit some years ago. I understand there was some talk of marriage between them, but it never came to anything. She described it to me, it is situated in a beautiful valley in the Sierra Nevada."

Paul Vitas drew himself upright and grinned.

"No offence, Saul Benjamin. We have to be careful. The Scandians came very close to wiping us out before the hail of fire - then it was their turn! We still keep our eyes open, there might still be some groups roaming about - and they would like to get their hands on Joshua."

Saul nodded.

"I understand your caution - you must remember that we took a risk landing here as well - after all, you might be Scandians yourselves!"

The grin widened.

"I doubt if you'll find Scandians interested in trying to plug the hole in the dam - they'd more than likely make it bigger!"

"We'll leave you to it, Paul Vitas - and good luck, I think you'll need it! If you'll take my advice, I'd get your men off the wall, by the look of it, there's a huge storm brewing in the west - and I think you might lose the dam altogether, when it hits!"

Vitas nodded slowly and his grin faded. He gestured to the listening men, who dispersed into the building. Saul backed into the shuttle and closed the door. Eli was sitting at the controls. He said nothing and lifted the ship off carefully. He turned to Saul.

"You took one hell of a risk!"

"I simply asked a serious of polite questions."

"I was ready to haul you back in the ship at the drop of a hat."

"It's nice to know that you take such good care of an old man, little brother."

"Cut the wisecracks! I'm fast learning what is meant by the phrase that there's no fool like an old fool!"

"I'm so glad you continue to improve your education."

"So, did you get some answers to your polite questions?"

"Of course! Our brother Vitas told me that the Administrator is to be found at his headquarters in the Sierra Nevada."

"Which could be a trap!"

"Might I suggest, that despite your valiant efforts, if they had wanted to entrap us, they would have had the perfect opportunity to do so whilst I was talking to them."

"Have it your way!"

"I always do - now, set course to the east and let us see if we can find the fabled structure built by Spiros Aristides!"

They had been hovering above the temporary camp. There were signs

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of activity on the ground, with teams leaving in the direction of the road along the top of the dam wall. Saul hoped they were taking his advice seriously and that they were on their way to evacuate the repair crews. The sky was ominously black over the ocean. The storm front had undoubtedly moved closer, in the short time he had spent talking to Paul Vitas. He had the bitter certainty that Eli and himself would arrive at the headquarters of Joshua Aristides at a critical point in human history. He had no doubt that the dam would finally give way with the onslaught of the gathering storm - and that the effects would be as cataclysmic as those which must have accompanied the fabled separation of Europe from Africa, in the time of Hercules.

They were making their way swiftly to the east. The Sierra Nevada Ranges loomed as a black smudge against the eastern sky. Eli was consulting the memory of maps and charts contained in the ship's computer. Saul broke the silence.

"You know, Eli. It is only when we're on a ship like the shuttle, that we can pretend that everything is as it always has been in the past - that is, during our lifetime. Here, we have all the facilities man has built up during the Kingdom of Peace. We have computers and these are supplied by the electricity generated in our fuel packs. We have comfort and we can maintain the pretence of normality. In the camps, such as we have just left, reality reigns. We are faced with increasing toil and dirt and a degradation down into the harsh existence of our ancestors. It will not be long before we lose the power in the packs - they are not of infinite capacity. Soon, we will be unable to use shuttles and suborbitors and we will be much more reliant on oil lamps for lighting and wood fires for heat."

"I suppose there is a point to this morality story?"

"I suppose there is - perhaps it is: - make the most of it whilst it lasts and don't complain when it ends!"

Eli nosed the shuttle into a long valley running deep between the crests of the ranges. There was still enough light to see that, for the most part, the terrain below had been untouched by the passing hail of fire. There was evidence of land slips, where the mountain sides showed fresh, raw gashes on their flanks. Saul pointed.

"The earth tremor must have been very severe. It isn't to be unexpected. This area is very close to the union between the African and the European tectonic plates. The Alps are the evidence of it, and the extension through into the Pyrenees and beyond."

Quite suddenly, they found themselves over the sprawling structure which was unmistakably the ancestral home of Joshua Aristides. It was also unmistakable that it had suffered extensive damage in the tremor. Saul shook his head in disbelief.

"Tragic! Quite tragic! It was one of the wonders of the Kingdom of Peace - now look at what it has become."

"Perhaps it was too wonderful and it was seen fit to remind us that nothing man constructs will last!"

Saul glanced at his brother sharply.

"You are showing unexpected resources of philosophical thought, little brother."

"I'm not just a pretty face, you know!"

They were coming in to a landing and Saul was spared the necessity of finding an answer. They came to rest on a level piece of ground close to

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several grounded shuttles. A small squad of men emerged from one of the flanking buildings and trotted to surround their ship. Eli turned to Saul.

"At least, they seem to have a better understanding of security than their fellow citizens along the coast."

"I suppose their state of preparedness would appeal to the military mind!"

"Be glad we have one military mind on board! If we were to rely on you, we would be probably be dead by now!"

"Perhaps we had better go and present ourselves."

Saul opened the outer door before Eli could stop him, he heard his brother's hiss of indignation at his impetuosity. He ignored it and stepped out into the weak, evening sunshine. He smiled at the young officer who stepped forward with his hand on the hilt of his undrawn sword.

"Greetings - Saul Benjamin from Jerusalem - together with Eli Benjamin - an officer in the Jerusalem Defence Militia. We bring greetings to Joshua Aristides from Michael ben Levi - and Leah."

The officer's hand dropped from the hilt of his sword.

"You are welcome - Joshua Aristides is not here at the moment. Perhaps we can offer you quarters for the night - and food?"

"You are most kind and your offer is gladly accepted. Eli! Eli! Stop sulking inside the shuttle and come out to meet your fellow officers!"

Eli appeared after a moment, his face was carefully composed, but it was obvious that he was inwardly seething at the treatment at the hands of his brother. The welcoming officer stiffened and snapped a salute.

"Captain Jose Ramirez, at your service, Captain Benjamin."

Eli returned the salute.

"You must excuse my brother, Saul - he thinks a shuttle simply closes itself down and snaps to attention when its needed!"

There were a few suppressed grins and the ice thawed noticeably.

"If you will follow us please - I hope you have sealed your shuttle, Captain Benjamin - a precaution, you understand, there are still Scandians roaming around in small groups. So far, they appear to be too cowed by the earthquake and the fire storm, to try any tricks, but it pays to be careful."

Ramirez led the way towards the building from which they had earlier emerged. Eli was still armed with his short sword and there had been no suggestion that it should be surrendered. Saul was of the private opinion that it wouldn't be of much use if the half dozen strong squad was to take it into their heads to arrest them. They were led into a central room. Other members of the guard came to attention at their entry. Ramirez gestured for them to relax.

"These brothers are from Jerusalem and they will be our guests until brother Joshua returns."

Saul asked casually.

"Can we expect him soon?"

"Quite soon, I think. He's on a tour of inspection."

The visitors were gestured to benches and the rest of the troops sat with them around a long table. Food was provided and gradually, the curiosity of one fighting man about another overcame any restraint. Eli found himself providing answers to questions about Armageddon. He had their undivided attention - without any doubt, they had been starved of all information. Ramirez explained.

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"The loss of communications is total. One of our scientists tells us that the 'E' layer, which bounces radio communications, has been totally disrupted by the passing of the comet - the result is, that we have heard nothing about your battle - and I suppose you've heard nothing about us. We only could guess that Armageddon had happened - the comet and the fire storm made Joshua certain - but it's been very frustrating not knowing the extent of the disruption - and then, we've had to contend with the failure of the dam."

Saul interjected.

"You must have suffered a very severe earth tremor."

Ramirez nodded.

"The whole world seemed to heave before our eyes. Those at the dam site told us that the wall seemed to shudder like the wriggling of a snake - and then it split in the centre."

"I'm amazed that it didn't completely fail."

"So are most of us! Joshua organised the evacuation of all the reclaimed farmlands in our Administration, especially those closest to the wall. We didn't have the facilities to go further afield. The power packs on our shuttles are fast becoming depleted. We've had to devote what is left to the task of trying to plug the dam wall."

Saul looked at some of the cracks in the barrack walls.

"I see that you didn't escape damage here."

"Most of the more solid structures are still standing - the flimsier ones fell. I'm afraid that the whole estate is in a state of neglect. We've been fighting the Scandians with every man we could muster."

A horn sounded from the outside. Ramirez and his reception squad got to their feet and tumbled out of the room. The rest of the guard were suddenly tense. One said casually.

"It could be Joshua - "

Eli glanced at Saul. The look was eloquent with an unspoken question. If it wasn't Joshua, then who could they be expecting which would cause such a rise in the general level of tension?

After a few minutes, Ramirez reappeared in the doorway, minus his squad.

"Joshua has returned - he has asked that you should be brought to him."

Ramirez led them across the open land, which had once been a park, towards the main structure. The squad he had commanded, was nowhere to be seen. Eli felt a gathering apprehension, he fingered the hilt of his sword and couldn't understand why the hairs on his neck were bristling. There was no doubt that the complex was on a war footing, but it lacked the men and resources which that implied. It was almost as if they were expecting an attack, but that the defence was no more than an elaborate bluff.

They were led through a dark tunnel, which pierced the building from one side to the other and then across a darkened, open space towards a dimly lit corner of another huge structure. It was too dark to see the status of the building, whether it had been severely damaged by the tremors, or whether it was intact. Ramirez led them through a side door, which was guarded by a solitary trooper with a drawn sword. Beyond the door was a short passage, which opened into a room lit by the flickering flames of a dozen oil lamps. A solitary man sat behind a table, which was covered in communiqués. He rose awkwardly as they entered and waited until they

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approached the table.

"Greetings - brothers from Jerusalem. You are most welcome to the comforts which still remain. I hope you will excuse me not moving forward to greet you - I have certain limitations!"

It was only then, that they noticed that he was without his left leg. It had been taken off at the knee. Saul's eyes widened in shock. He looked into the Administrator's face and found that he was assessing him steadily. There was no doubt that this was Joshua Aristides - but a very changed version to that elegant, sophisticated individual who had graced the councils of the Administrators in Jerusalem. This man was grey faced and even in the flickering, imperfect light, it was lined with stress and hopelessness. His hair was also grey - almost silver. He had aged from the comparatively young looking man of some six hundred and forty years, to one who was much older. Saul couldn't stop the unbidden thought: How fortunate that Leah had not united with this man. If she had been seeking a father figure, she would have found one!

58.

The approach to Asher's villa, had been slow and tedious. Leah felt a resurgence of the doubts which she had had about the wisdom of the trek from Jerusalem. It had been Michael's idea and it had come from out of the blue, just two days after the evening visit of Malachi Judah. Whatever had been said between him and her husband, she didn't know. There had been no appreciable change in Michael on the following day, but she knew that he had slept very little during the night following the visit. It was on the second day, when Michael had suddenly suggested that it was high time for them to return to the villa. Leah had raised immediate protests.

"We moved to the Secretariat because it was almost impossible to coordinate the administration from the other side of Jerusalem, It will be ten times worse, if we're marooned out in the hills and have to rely on one or two shuttle trips a day - quite apart from the fact that it won't be long before we won't even have them, when the power packs are exhausted. It just is not practical, Michael!"

His eyes were more alive than she had seen them since his return from the battle. He grinned.

"As logical and as beautiful as ever, my darling! Just for this once, let's do something rash! We'll even go by donkey, if that will calm your conscience about using the shuttle - although I think some of the older women won't be all that enthusiastic!"

"Neither will this younger woman - especially if she has to carry the baby!"

"Mary the mother of Jesus managed - and I'm sure you will as well!"

"What's happened to you, Michael? You're - different!"

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"I don't know - but whatever it is - don't complain about it."

"Believe me, I won't - but I still can't understand this compulsion to go back to the hills."

"It IS our home, my darling - surely you want to see whether it's still standing!"

"Of course - but what if it isn't? What if we can't live there - then we would have made the journey for nothing."

"Then - we will turn round and come back to Jerusalem! Of course, if you don't want to go, I could always go by myself!"

"I didn't say that I didn't want to go, but we have to be sensible! What about the Administration - there's work to be done."

"Delegate!"

"There are some things I can't delegate."

"Then, I'll help you!"

She stared hard at him. He grinned at her, it appeared that the clouds which had smothered him, had lifted. Her heart began to beat a little faster. She whispered.

"I'd like that, Michael. I want you to help - and then, when you are really well, to take up the reins."

"Then, it's agreed? We go back to the villa tomorrow?"

She nodded and capitulated.

"If you think we should."

Early on the following day, the household set out on a small convoy of donkeys. First, it was necessary to cross over the great gash the earthquake had left between Jerusalem and the eastern hills. After that, they began the climb up the steeper slopes towards Asher's villa.

It was an eerie feeling to wind down the side of the chasm opened up by the earth tremor. Leah kept thinking of the passage in Zechariah:

'On that day his feet will stand on the Mount of Olives, which is opposite Jerusalem to the east, and the mountain shall be cleft in two by an immense valley running east and west; half the mountain shall move northwards and half southwards. The valley between the hills shall be blocked, for a new valley between them shall reach as far as Asal'.

Through the rubble strewn bed and then up the further side, it was as if they moved out of the known and comfortable world into something alien, something which had stayed hidden for countless thousands of years before the earthquake had torn open the smooth flanks of the Mount of Olives and had left this ugly scar.

The slow amble into the hills brought them back on to more familiar territory. Here and there, were traces of the old Pod markers which had once guided them, to and from the Holy City, during countless journeys through the centuries of the Kingdom. Those journeys had taken only a little more than thirty minutes - the duration of the bumpy ride on the slow moving donkeys promised to be much greater.

Leah had wondered why she had stubbornly insisted on keeping Michael to his joking suggestion. It was certainly not a comfortable way to travel from point 'A' to point 'B', but there was a degree of challenge in Michael's remark, which had stirred a response: It had been the way Mary had travelled with Jesus. It had been that way when Joseph had fled with his

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family into Egypt and it had been by this method that they had retraced their steps to settle in Nazareth.

She could hear the muffled complaints of some of her attendants. They were too used to luxury, they were a product of easier times - this would have been the first occasion when they would have travelled any distance without the aid of a Pod or a Shuttle. She told herself it was a good exercise for them. Difficult times were ahead, times which would test their patience and endurance. Michael was riding slightly ahead with two of the men who helped in the house. Luke wasn't with them for once, he had been left in charge of the Secretariat.

Michael looked back at her and grinned cheerfully. Leah's heartbeat quickened. He looked so well, the drawn, grey colour of tension had gone, he sat alert and vigorous. She wondered again, what Malachi could have said to him, to have prompted such a miraculous recovery. She had put a rein on her curiosity, sometimes it was advisable to leave well alone.

"You're very quiet, my darling!"

"I'm concentrating on giving the baby a smooth ride!"

"Let me have him for a while."

"I don't think that would be a good idea."

"It was you that insisted on the donkeys!"

"I'm glad you didn't suggest camels!"

"Now! There's something to think about!"

"I wouldn't bother!"

"Never mind, it's no more than another two or three kilometres."

"I am suitably encouraged!"

He grinned and then laughed aloud. He nudged the donkey round and urged it to catch up with the leaders.

The prediction of two or three kilometres increased to six or seven. Leah gritted her teeth and tried to look as if she was enjoying the experience. It was a relief when they came to the end of the private road which led to the estate and turned to pass through the wide entrance pillars, which marked the boundary. She was a little surprised to find that they were still standing and her heart lightened a little. She had fully expected to be confronted with a wrecked house and she wasn't quite sure how she would react.

Her relief was short lived - there had been substantial damage to the old structure. One wing was practically demolished, where the ground had quite simply slipped away from under the foundations. The main structure looked intact, except for some of the upper stonework which had fallen. She halted the little donkey besides those of Michael and the two servants and tried to shut her ears to the exclamations of distress from her women. She made her voice unemotional.

"It looks quite a mess."

Michael nodded, the resurgence of good humour had evaporated.

"I'm beginning to be sorry that I made the suggestion to come home. It would have been wiser to have sent a survey team first."

Leah responded briskly.

"We haven't got people to spare - we live here - it's up to us to put things right where we can - and where we can't - we leave well alone!"

Piotr, John and Rachel had already slid down from the backs of their mounts and looked ready to dash off to explore. She turned to her ladies.

"Sisters! I want you to stop the lamentations and make sure the

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children don't venture anywhere where they could get into trouble. Perhaps one of you could take care of Adam?"

One of the younger women stepped forward. Leah handed down her son and then dismounted. She patted the donkey - the little beast had done well, it hadn't been its fault that its anatomy hadn't fitted hers. She looked up at Michael and found him staring at the wrecked wing.

"We can't do much about that side of the house - perhaps we'd better take a look at the rest - before it gets too dark to go back to Jerusalem - that is, should it prove necessary."

He dismounted and stood beside her.

"I must say, you're very calm about finding our home in ruins."

"I expected it to be worse!"

They walked across the garden in front of the main entrance and picked their way through blocks of building stone which had tumbled from the roof level. Michael eyed the upper part dubiously.

"This really isn't a very good idea - something could come down on our heads at any moment."

"Just as long as the children keep out of harms way."

Leah stood at the bottom of the flight of steps, where Asher had so often greeted his guests. She remembered the time when Joel and Marcus had arrived after so many years. It had been the first time she had met her cousin face to face - she remembered, she had thought he was a stuffshirt and had gone out of her way to imply that he was too old to carry the luggage. She smiled a little sadly. She would never stop missing Marcus and they had been happy days - then, she had thought herself to be so much in love with Joshua. How things had changed in such a short time.

She and Michael walked up the steps together and entered their home. Inside, there was a lot of disorder but little damage. Furnishings had been shaken around and were out of place, but the structure seemed sound enough. They went through one room after the other and finally, came to the large room which had been the gathering place of so many dignitaries in the time of the Kingdom. It too seemed to have escaped the full wrath of the earth tremor - but appearances were deceptive.

She walked to the windows which opened out onto the pride of the house, the great balcony which had been built out over the deep valley, by Mordecai, Asher's father. Marcus had once described it as a place for reflection, for dreaming dreams, especially when the night was dark and the stars were the only light.

The balcony was gone. Just beyond the window, was an ugly gash where the paving ended, she looked to the right and the left and saw where traces of it still remained, fragments attached to the house walls. It was then, that she began to weep. Michael took her in his arms and stared over her shoulders at the damage. She regained control and drew back from him.

"I'm being stupid, Michael! We should be happy that something is still left of the house - others have nothing. One thing is for sure, nothing can be done about the gallery. We must close off all access to it, to make sure the children don't get into trouble."

She moved resolutely away from the window and marched through the rest of the rooms towards the garden entrance. She paused at the top of the short flight of steps leading down. The paving was cracked and the garden looked generally unkempt, but that was because of lack of attention. For

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some reason, she felt the urge to look at Asher's grave. If that had been damaged in any way, she would have turned round and insisted on returning to Jerusalem. Michael followed her, he was wise enough to know that she had to work out the impulse to assess everything.

Asher's grave was in one of the lower levels of the garden, protected by trees and high shrubs. It had been intended to be a private place. His was one of many graves. His father and mother had been laid to rest centuries earlier - they had been Survivors and had not lived beyond the third century of the Kingdom. It was also the grave site of Elena and her child.

As they stepped around the last curve in the path, they stopped. A solitary figure was kneeling in front of one of the mounds of earth. Its back was towards them and was crouched low on its heels as if bowed in prayer. Leah touched Michael's arm to restrain him from moving forward. At the same time, the figure turned, realising that someone had interrupted the privacy. Leah whispered incredulously.

"Feodor!"

The man got to his feet, his clothing was in tatters. He stood without moving towards them, waiting perhaps, for rejection. Michael moved forward, hesitated and then, the two men clutched each other in welcome. Leah waited until they separated. Feodor took her in his arms and kissed her on the cheek. All three were crying. Michael managed to say.

"We thought you were dead - how CAN you be alive."

Feodor forced a smile.

"You can't kill off a mad brained Cossack that easily. I can only answer you by saying that I am only still alive with great difficulty. I ought to have died ten times over!"

"I can see you have a story to tell us - "

Leah interrupted.

"How did you get here? The last we heard, you were in the Caucasus Mountains and surrounded by hostile forces."

Feodor nodded.

"That was true enough, we had been overrun in the Ukraine, we fought desperately, but Malenski sent some of his most seasoned - and savage - troops against us. I lost touch with Alex Barenkov - until then, we had fought a combined campaign. I suppose you have no idea of what happened to him? I thought not - I suspect he's dead, just as I ought to be dead. I had good men, we had trained together and we knew how to look after each other, we ought to have been overrun, but we kept moving, deeper and deeper into the mountains, avoiding the enemy patrols and striking them when we could. I think we were a nuisance to them until the end. We tied down quite a number of their units.

To cut a long story short, we were down to three of us and surrounded by about three hundred - and then - and then, the comet came. It was so light that we couldn't use darkness as a cover, so we were forced to shelter in caves. It was as well that we did - I think you can guess what happened when the hail of fire came. The three of us were safe enough, but we could hear their screams - I still hear the screams!

When the firestorm has passed, we waited - and then, we ventured out and what we saw made us physically sick. We got out of the area as soon as possible. It was comparatively easy, although there were still groups of the enemy about. It wasn't until much later that we realised that all the fight had

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gone out of them. At first, we avoided them, we made our way south, down into Anatolia and close to the mountain of Noah - what do they call it? - Ararat. It was there that the three of us went our own ways - a bit like Noah's sons, each in a different direction. The other two didn't have my interest to head to the south.

I didn't walk all the way here - Cossacks hate walking! I watched a shuttle standing in a field, for three days. Nobody seemed to own it, so I 'borrowed' it and it brought me into the north of Israel. After that, I thought it was too conspicuous, so I landed one evening, close to Mount Hermon and took to my legs once more - and here I am!"

Michael shook his head in wonderment.

"One of these days, you will tell us the full story."

Feodor looked at the graves.

"Only if you will allow me to stay, Michael."

Leah protested.

"Where else can you go, Feodor!?"

He shook his head.

"I don't know - not back into Russia, that's for certain. Incidentally, on my way from Hermon, I walked to the mountains which skirt the edge of the Plain of Esdraelon. No one took a great deal of notice of me, they were too busy shifting the dead - or what's left of them. I can tell you this, much the same conditions apply wherever I have travelled. Gog's Horde was singled out no matter where they were - retribution was complete. For this reason, I won't be going back to my home at Kharkov.

On my journey south, I met some who had come from that area. When you share a fire at night, people talk and they told the story of what has happened all over Magog - Remember, Magog was to receive a fire storm just as much as Gog. Michael, you identified Magog as southern Russia, Anatolia, Greece and the islands and the coasts. I have seen what has happened to Magog with my own eyes - and it was confirmed by what the travellers told me. There is no place left for me to go in that direction.

There's something else, in earlier days, when we were still fighting Malenski, some of my own men managed to get through to me from Kharkov. They told me what Malenski's men did to my home, when they finally broke through the defences. They pillaged it and they gutted it - it's a burned out wreck."

He paused and swallowed.

"The same men told me what they did with my horses - my stallions and breeding mares, even those in foal - they butchered them for the sheer savage delight of doing so - and left their corpses to the birds - No! I have no desire to go back to Russia!"

Leah gripped his arm. She remembered the joy he had had in his horses - how she and Marcus had seen him exercising them on the rough ground close to his home. Feodor went on.

"All I have left is here - a memory - "

He pointed to Elena's grave.

"A dream that could never come to realisation - but it is all I have, other than these rags."

Leah said firmly.

"You have us! You have a home! You will share ours until the time comes when Our Father decides it is enough!"

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Feodor looked at Michael.

"Is that your wish too, Michael? We parted in anger the last time we stood here, I was in a white-hot rage because you had guaranteed Malenski's safety - I had a lot to say - I doubt if you will want me to stay!"

There was a scamper of feet, John raced around the curve and then stopped dead at the sight of the trio. Piotr followed and nearly collided with him. He paused and then raced past John. The boy threw himself into Feodor's arms. The Cossack staggered a little and then lifted him in a bear hug. Piotr hung on his neck.

"Uncle Feodor - is it really you - are you going to live with us."

Feodor's tears were flowing unchecked. He looked over the boy's head. Michael was grinning from ear to ear.

"I think that makes the invitation unanimous, my friend - our home is your home - for as long as you wish."

They returned to the house. Piotr wouldn't let go of Feodor, it was as if he imagined that he would vanish if he did. The servants who had accompanied them from Jerusalem, had already started to put the place into order. Adam was wailing lustily, Feodor grinned at Michael.

"That is additional surprise - my congratulations to you both!"

"He was born on the night the comet appeared. I would say that ours was one of the few households in Jerusalem to ignore it!"

Later in the evening, they shared a meal together. When it was over, they talked over times which would not return. Michael gestured to the room around them, now illuminated by the flickering lights of oil lamps, which had been resurrected from some dark cellar where they had been in storage for centuries.

"It seems that we are the proof of the theory that history tends to follow a circular course. Man progresses, his empires are built and they fall, and those who remain, return to the basic existence of their ancestors. The luxuries we took for granted in the time of the Kingdom are gone - now we have to use the methods of our ancestors to give us light and heat. In Ezekiel, we are told that we will use the wood of the weapons of the enemy for seven years, to fuel our fires. Instead of plentiful electricity, we must use oil from the olives for lighting.

I think of the many men who have sat around this table over the centuries. Some were humble men, others were elevated by the Firstlings to be great men to serve the community in the time of the Kingdom. Now, we sit here, our Kingdom is shattered and our power is spent. The Administrators can no longer function. Now, all we have left, is to wait in patience."

59.

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

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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

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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.

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"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?"

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"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

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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

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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 have 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

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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!"

60.

At the end of the seventh month after the great battle, it was reported to Michael and Leah that the land had been cleansed of the last of the corpses. They had been gathered and buried in the Valley of Abarim, under the shadow of Mount Nebo. Michael gave the instruction that the valley was to be blocked, so that no one was tempted to treat the place as one of memorial. From that time onwards, it would be known as the Valley of Gog's Horde, in accordance with the prophecy of Ezekiel.

By this time, the healing process throughout the land was beginning to take effect. Crops had been sown, even between the residual rocks of the meteorite shower which had devastated the Plains of Esdraelon, of Sharon and many other localities where there had been a concentration of Gog's Horde. The farmers had been compelled to go back to the old methods, broadcasting the seed by hand, attempting to avoid the outcrops of rock and the stony places. Michael and Leah often went out to watch them, the age old method and processing of sowing and harvesting, had replaced the mechanised methods to which they had become accustomed during the thousand years of the Kingdom of Peace. On one such occasion, Leah had murmured.

"It is as if that time had never been - no more than a wonderful memory, when the Lord and His Firstlings walked amongst us and taught us."

"They still walk amongst us and they still teach us, but we can't see them. The message is still the same - beware of the Second Death - it's a peril we still have to face."

Leah shivered at her husband's words.

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"I wonder if any of us will be accounted worthy to enter into the new creation - or if all that is left to us is the lake of fire."

"I see this time of waiting as the last preparation, the final honing of the qualities which Our Father will expect. In many ways, we are back to the situation which existed during the Kingdom, the only evil we now have to combat is that which lives in our own heart!"

They had turned for home and the donkeys were ambling along at their own pace. It was nearly sunset and the farmers were trudging back towards their villages. Leah reined in and faced to the west, where the sun was descending into the rising waters of the Great Sea.

"Do you really think that the only evil left is within us. Isn't Satan still active?"

Michael shook his head.

"If we follow the Book of Revelation, we can read in the twentieth Chapter:

'But fire came down on them from heaven and consumed them; and the Devil, their seducer, was flung into the lake of fire and sulphur'.

A little later in the same Chapter, we find the following:

'Then Death and Hades were flung into the lake of fire. This lake of fire is the second death; and into it are flung any whose names were not to be found in the roll of the living.'

In the twenty-first Chapter, we can read:

'But the cowardly, the faithless, and the vile, murderers, fornicators, sorcerers, idolaters, and liars of every kind, their lot will be the second death, in the lake that burns with sulphurous flames'.

From this it would appear that the Devil is thrown into the lake of fire earlier than those which have still to face the judgement.

To answer your question, yes, I think we are free of Satan and his influence. All the reports we have received confirm what Saul and Eli told us, that there are still groups of men who survived the passing of the comet, but they are threatening no one. If they are armed, they don't use their arms.

The Survivors told us that much the same thing happened a thousand years ago, when the Kingdom of Peace was established. One of the first things to change, was the attitude of men who had once been mortal enemies. They lost the will to fight each other and they settled down to cooperate and live in peace - that attitude was the foundation of the Kingdom and was only disturbed when Satan was released after the thousand years was over."

They nudged their donkeys into the slow amble and urged them towards home.

"I really fear the Second Death, Michael - I fear it for myself and our children - and I fear it for you and all those I love."

"We were taught to fear it - I interpret that to mean much the same as godfear - in other words - respect. We are wise to fear it - there will be no one who can bluff their way into the new creation."

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They were within sight of their home, once again, on the highest point above it, they reined in to watch the sun descend like a fireball into the ocean.

"The waters are still rising, faster now, according to the latest measurements. Saul is keeping a close eye on it. We can only guess what is happening further to the west. It's almost sure that the dikes across the Adriatic have been breached - as well as those around the Aegean islands."

"Joshua faced an impossible task. I often think of him, alone and maimed."

"We are all alone, Leah. I know that sounds hard, but we are all alone and we are all maimed in one way or the other. It is part of our final test - to see how we cope with the adversities which followed the end of the Kingdom of Peace. I am convinced of it - otherwise, why would Our Father allow this extra time? He could have made the Last Day to coincide with the Battle, but He has planned otherwise."

The pattern was set for the remaining days of their existence in the physical body. They were not days of comfort, each one brought its own crisis which had to be solved. Michael had assumed the full responsibility for what remained of his Administrative area. In theory, he was still steward over a vast area, but in practice, it was impossible to reach very far beyond the borders of the ancient Kingdom of Israel.

There were many reasons for it, not the least being that the citizens were now reduced to the limits of where their own two legs could carry them, or, if they were lucky, where a pack animal could take them. In theory, they could travel where they might want to go, but in practical terms, to be isolated from the centre of the Administration in Jerusalem, rendered the longer journeys impractical.

Much the same situation applied in what might have remained of any other Administrator's area of authority. For all intents and purposes, the Kingdom had degenerated into small units governed by whoever could show ability, with vast areas between these isolated centres, where men and women fended for themselves and acknowledged no central authority.

As each month passed, additional resources were added, as soon as they could be repaired or restored. The power supply had been an early priority, but it was never able to provide more than a basic service, which frequently faltered and failed as the load became too great. It was out of the question to recharge the majority of the power packs for suborbitors, transporters and shuttles. The lifeless machines rested where they had been landed from their last flights. They had the appearance of huge, extinct monsters, hoping in vain, to be activated once again into service.

Buildings were slowly repaired, or were demolished when it was seen to be impractical. Life within the cities and towns progressed at a leisurely pace. The frenetic running to and fro, which had characterised the period during which Satan had been released, had slowed to a calm acceptance of each day as it dawned. As the years went on, it became more and more of a surprise to see the dawn of another day - for surely, very soon, the last one of all would dawn.

In the household of Michael ben Levi, a new child was born in the second year after the great battle. When Leah had realised that she was once again pregnant, she had been filled with fear. The pregnancy had been unplanned, it was surely more than ever the case, that it was the wrong time

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to bring another life into the world. She was well aware that there had been no decrease in the birth-rate, in fact, it was increasing. Until she had become pregnant, she had shaken her head in wonderment that parents would be so irresponsible. She had hidden her condition from Michael for while, but in the end, it had been impossible not to tell him. His reaction had been startling. He had beamed with joy and she had been almost smothered with attention. She had protested.

"But don't you think it's wrong, Michael?"

"How can it be wrong to welcome a blessing from Our Heavenly Father, my darling!? It's a wonderful gift and we can rejoice!"

The child was a girl and there was none of the drama which had accompanied the birth of Adam. She had wanted Michael to name her. He had shaken his head and grinned.

"This time, it's your turn - you will name our daughter."

Leah hesitated.

"Would you object to - Miriam? Joshua's mother was such a wonderful old lady - I loved her very much."

Michael nodded.

"Miriam she will be - and I agree - I loved that old lady - did you know she flirted with me the last time we met, just before the end of the Kingdom?"

Leah laughed.

"I promise to keep an eye on our daughter - but I think she's already flirting with you!"

In the countryside, there was another fulfilment of the prophecy of Ezekiel. The farmers gathered the weapons of the fallen warriors and stripped them of their iron, and the wooded shafts they burned on their fires. They had no need to cut down trees or gather wood in any other way. It was also the case that those who travelled through the land sometimes found the remains of a warrior who had fallen in the hail of fire. For the most part, they would find skeletal remains, picked clean by the birds. In the days immediately after the main burial, Michael had set up a commission to take care of such events. In fact, it was their task to go through the countryside to search for such remains and to take them to the Valley of Gog's Horde and there bury them.

Infrequently, they would have visitors who took the trouble to climb through the Judaeen hills to their home. Michael displayed no desire to live in Jerusalem and Leah never mentioned the matter, she was content to rear her growing brood of children in the peace of the countryside and await what was sure to come. There was only one concession, it was one which Michael's advisors had insisted upon, and that was, that a shuttle should be available to bring them the short distance to the city, when circumstances dictated. It was one of the few whose power pack still had sufficient charge to make the short journey. Michael had protested that he wanted and expected no privileges, but it was of no avail, Malachi Judah, on behalf of the advisors, had insisted.

More than seven years had passed since the great battle. It was the time of harvest and Michael had already been supplied with pessimistic reports of its status. The yield promised to be no more than moderate and he was well aware that the storages which had remained, or had been recovered from Gog's looters, were now becoming empty. For seven years, they had compensated for the demands of an increasing population which could not be

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supplied from the harvest yield.

He went to his bed still wrestling with the problem. He found it impossible to sleep. The night was very quiet and for a while, he sat at the window and watched the moon move across the sky. Behind him, the still form of his wife was sleeping. Quite suddenly, he felt a great surge of joy at the blessings they had received from their God. He thought back over the years he had lived. The extended lifetime which had been permitted to him. He was now nearly three hundred and fifty years old, not an old man by any means, compared with those who lived into their ninth or tenth century, like Joel and Asher. He had witnessed many marvels and wonders and he had been spared much tribulation. He had walked and talked with the Firstlings of the Lord Jesus - and perhaps, he had even walked and talked with the Lord Himself - it was a proposition which made him catch his breath. How did he know whether one of those he had taken to be a Firstling, was not in fact, the Lord Jesus Himself!? He had no way of telling.

He went to bed, the new thought had driven out the earlier pessimism. He lay awake for a little longer and then finally, he slept. It was still dark when he woke quite abruptly. He sat up in bed very alert. At first, he thought that one of the children had cried out, but the house was silent. He looked across at Leah and found that she too was awake.

"What is it, Michael?"

"I don't know - but I have an incredible urge to get up and get dressed."

He got out of bed and pulled on some clothes.

"Get the children dressed, Leah. I'll rouse everyone else - we must go to Jerusalem - now!"

She didn't argue, it would have been pointless, Michael was already out of the door of their room. She was surprised to find that she agreed with him, she didn't know why, but it was essential to go to Jerusalem without any delay - the thought came to her, the reason would be revealed in due course.

The shuttle had been parked, unused, for seven years, at the side of the landing pad which had seen so many visitors come and go over the centuries. When she led her excited and chattering children out into the cool early morning air, she was not surprised to see that Michael had already readied it for service. Michael had roused the rest of the household, it seemed that they were expected to accompany them. Feodor drew her aside.

"What's happening, Leah. I can't get any sense out of Michael - are we under some sort of attack?"

She shook her head.

"He knows what he's doing - we'll understand when we come to Jerusalem."

Feodor raised an eyebrow.

"Is that where we're going - it's nice to know!"

They crowded into the shuttle. Leah was glad it was for only a short distance, the little ship was grossly overcrowded. In other circumstances, she would have complained about the risk, but, on this occasion, it didn't seem important.

The sun rose as they laboured over the Judaeian Hills. Her home was behind her, she had no opportunity to look at it for the last time - and she knew it would be for the last time. A peculiar sense of unreality seemed to pervade her being. A sense of the rightness and inevitability of what was

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happening. It was a sense that was confirmed dramatically, as they crested the last hill before the Holy City. Below them, every road and path was crowded with a great concourse of people. They were all walking in the one direction. There was no unseemly haste, but there was no loitering either. It seemed as if the entire population of Jerusalem and beyond, from the fields and hills of Judaea, were moving with one purpose. Their destination was the twin hills of Moriah and Zion.

Michael also knew where he was going. He headed for the summit and gently landed the shuttle close to the place where the hand of Abraham had been held by that of the angel, to prevent him from demonstrating the ultimate act of faith by sacrificing Isaac. They climbed down from the shuttle without a word and grouped around Michael in a sober circle. He looked at each one of them and there was no mistaking the radiant joy he was experiencing.

"Be glad and rejoice, for we have come to Mount Zion!"

Feodor murmured a little shakily.

"Amen - "

And then, a little apprehensively.

"What now?"

"We wait upon the Lord. Look, see how they come up the hill. They have all received the same summons - and they have obeyed. Once again, Jerusalem is the symbol of what is happening all over the world. The physical Mount Zion is the focal point, for a Godly event which is taking place in every realm of eternity - Death and Hell shall give up the dead in them!"

The hillside was soon crowded with a mass of men, women and children. They were very quiet, when they came to their places, they sat. Some whispered to each other, others, quite clearly, prayed. Michael and Leah sat together, leaning upon each other, with their children gathered around them. Piotr sat close to Feodor, who placed his arm around the boy. Leah asked softly.

"What will happen now, Michael?"

He drew her close to him.

"Now! I will tell you how much I love you and how thankful I am for all that we have shared. I thank you for our children and our home and for the comfort and support you have given me. I thank you for your devotion and your loving care - and above all, I thank Our God that He gave me the opportunity to tell you this before everything is changed."

He kissed her and she clung to him. He took each of the children in turn and embraced them. They said their farewells to those closest to them and then they sat down in their places and looked around at the familiar scenery.

"It seems so impossible that it will all cease to exist, Michael. It is so beautiful, so wonderful, so intricate and precise in the way it works. There was so much loving care and precision in the act of creation - and now, very soon, it will simply cease to be."

"It came from the Hand of God. He expelled it by an inflection of His will - by the Word all things were made. I like to think that He will take it back into His hand - as it were, scoop it back into it. His hand has always been a protection, it's a good place to be - how is it said in scripture: 'the hollow of His hand'? A place of protection - and we must always remember that from the same hand will come the creation of a new heaven and a new earth and the former things will not be remembered, all thought of them will be driven

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out, so wonderful will it be!"

"And for us - will there be - pain - are we to die. I'm not frightened for myself - but the children - "

"I have only thoughts of peace towards you, saith the Lord. He has no reason to inflict pain upon us. He is perfect in his justice as well as in his love and mercy. When the Firstlings experienced the First Resurrection, there was no pain. In a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, they were changed from their mortal body into the immortal. The corruption gave way to incorruption. Our Father once said that no man could see him and live. Human flesh is incapable of existence before the Being of God. It isn't constructed to withstand the power and majesty which is God.

Once, God took the dust of the earth and moulded it and created the human form. It was a definitive act of creation, something quite separate from all that which had already been created. Into that lifeless clay, He breathed and formed man in His own image, and man became a living soul. I have always seen the moment when mankind is separated from this earth, as being the act of breathing in by God, taking back the breath He blew into Adam. I believe that this is the way it will be."

They waited in quietness and in peace and there came a moment of transition. They were not even conscious that something had happened to them. They were not even aware when they ceased to draw breath, or when their hearts no longer pumped. The hills of Moriah and Zion ceased to be a reality. Instead, they were confronted with a radiance which was beyond human thought and perception. In the midst of that radiance was a scene which was beyond the powers of human description.

The flesh was gone, the soul remained. Age and physical condition, had ceased to be a consideration. An infant was equal in stature with the parent. It was as if they were infinitesimal specks of light, being drawn into the eternal intensity of that which was before them.

In the first letter of the Apostle John, the words are found:

'What we shall be has not yet been disclosed, but we know that when it is disclosed, we shall be like him, because we shall see him as he is.'

And further in the same letter we find:

'God is love; he who dwells in love is dwelling in God, and God in him. This is for us the perfection of love, to have confidence on the day of judgement, and this we can have, because even in this world we are as he is. There is no room for fear in love; perfect love banishes fear. For fear brings with it the pains of judgement, and anyone who is afraid has not attained to love in its perfection. We love because he loved us first.

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