

Leah faced him when he opened the door. Her expression was one of determined resolution. She walked past him and he closed the door panel slowly.

"I was hoping you would be here, Marcus - I have come to a decision."

From the look on her face, he knew he wasn't going to like what he was about to hear.

"Leah, I'm sorry - "

"Let me finish, Marcus - please! I think I can understand your point of view, but I want you to understand mine. I recognise that you're in a hurry to move on into another phase of your life. You have just been placed in a position of considerable authority and you rightly feel that your life is now totally different to what it was before Father Joel died. You have been alone for decades, I believe, thirty years, since your wife was taken up into another realm. In all this time, you have felt unsettled and unprepared to accept another partner in marriage. Now, you think it's time to rectify the situation."

He held up his hand and stopped the flow.

"You seem to know my reasoning better than I know it myself, Leah. You've formed quite a few conclusions, and most of them are totally inaccurate!"

"You can't deny that you've shied away from any suggestion that you should remarry."

"I don't deny it! Why should I deny it? I hadn't met anyone who could change my mind."

"And now, you've met someone?"

"I've met you, Leah!"

"You knew me before Father Joel died, you've known of me for years and we've become closer more recently - but you can't deny that earlier on, you put barriers between us whenever the subject of a relationship was suggested."

"Perhaps, because it was suggested and not allowed to happen!"

"Has it now - happened? Or is it that your changed status has suddenly made it desirable?"

"I think you do me an injustice, Leah! I'm not that calculating. I happen to love you - and I have done so ever since we got closer - but Joshua was in the way - and so was Michael for that matter."

"Michael?"

"Don't pretend to be shocked! Asher made it very clear that you were nearer Michael's age than mine and that he thought it was a good match."

"How does Asher have anything to do with what happens between us? Since when has age got anything to do with the issue? If you want to act like a grandfather, you'll be treated like a grandfather!"

"I haven't had any encouragement to act in any other way! - or do you deny that?"

They stared at each other for a long moment. Marcus broke the silence and turned away and laughed softly.

"Do you realise that we're actually shouting at each other?"

"Yes, we are and that wasn't my intention, I'm sorry, Marcus. - I told you that I've come to a decision."

"Which is?"

"Simply this - It isn't fair to you to have to wait for me to make up my mind. I have to move on with my life and so do you. I have decided to either accept your proposal or refuse it as soon as we return to Salem. I hope you

will be prepared to wait until then."

He nodded slowly.

"I'm not suggesting a business partnership, Leah. I love you and I want you to be my wife - I hope you will remember that."

"I will remember that, Marcus - and in turn, I hope you realise that I am trying to be fair - a marriage between us will only work if I am wholehearted and single-minded. Unless I can eliminate Joshua from the equation, I can't be either of those things and I wouldn't inflict myself on you in those circumstances."

He didn't attempt to touch her as she walked to the door and let herself out. He stared at the closed door panel, long after it had shut behind her. He sighed and turned back to the window. The sun was almost gone and the fantasy world of golden dust motes had gone with it. The long shadows had blended and the fields were becoming uniformly grey. He suddenly felt as old as his years, perhaps, the traumas of courtship ought to be left to the young, they had more time and energy.

There were about thirty men and women grouped around the table for dinner. They were introduced as district managers and their spouses. The term 'governor' wasn't used. Alexei was placed at the head of the table and was clearly considered the patriarch. It was a reminder of Joel, he had always been in the comparable position in Salem. Marcus felt the pang of his loss and the sudden realisation that he would be expected to fill the role. The departure of Joel was still too new and the hours since his death had been too filled with activity, to allow for thoughts of how his successor would be seen in the eyes of others. Once again, he was filled with apprehension, Joel would be a hard act to follow.

The dinner meandered its course, it was a leisurely affair with

accompanying conversation which was noteworthy for its banality. Alexei twittered like an elderly bird and his district managers tried hard not to talk about anything which might be construed as challenge to his benign supremacy. The long meal came to its close and Marcus made suitably complementary remarks about its excellence. He was quite unprepared for the change of pace which followed.

Alexei leaned forward, almost confidentially and then said in a voice loud enough to be heard at the other end of the table.

"My dear brother Marcus, will you now tell us what you have in mind for a joint venture along the Lena?"

Marcus hesitated and flicked a glance at Leah, she had raised her head and was watching him intently. Marcus did the only thing he could in the circumstances - he played for time. He forced himself to relax back into his chair and stared into the sweetly benign face of his host.

"My dear brother Alexei, we haven't yet had the opportunity to explore together, the few thoughts I have had on this subject - "

"But you have had some thoughts?"

"Yes, I am sure all the Administrators have had many thoughts since our meeting. We all agreed to try to increase our harvest yield and build additional storage - but also, we were to look for an extension to our crop areas. I suggest that this is where joint ventures between us could be most effective. Perhaps, you have already focused your mind on a particular section of the Lena?"

Alexei was saved from an immediate answer by one of his managers.

"But surely, brother Marcus, our present yield is more than sufficient for our needs. The Lord is bountiful and He has never allowed us to go short. The twelvefold yearly harvest was provided to ensure that the citizen's never

hungered. One could almost construe our efforts to increase the yield as - greed!"

Marcus eyed him speculatively. He had been introduced as Georgi Malenski and his area of responsibility was in the far north, close to the Arctic Circle. His harvest was the rich plantations of fast growing timber which kept the structural industry supplied. Marcus answered softly staring into the intent, dark eyes which were locked on his.

"Greed is surely one of the deadly sins which is a product of the activity of Satan, brother Georgi. I was not aware that the Evil One had been released! We cannot attribute the sin of greed to our Kingly-Priests - or to the Lord Jesus whom they represent. It was, after all, their instruction to set aside an increased percentage of the harvest in this bountiful time, so that when the lean times of famine and disease come upon us, we will have sufficient."

There was a slight flush on Georgi's face, he stared for a moment and then lowered his eyes.

"Of course, brother Marcus! We are committed to following the instruction of our Kings and Priests."

It sounded convincing but Marcus wasn't sure. He added for good measure.

"If we are not sure, we must certainly ask the way, our Kings and Priests will not leave us in ignorance, brothers and sisters."

There was another silence, then one of the wives from further down the table interjected.

"Perhaps, that is the problem, brother Marcus. Our Kings and Priests entrust the administration of the Kingdom into the keeping of others. Sometimes, we are not sure of the right path - "

Her voice trailed away, suddenly aware of the tense silence. Alexei

had relaxed into his chair and seemed far away. It was left again to Marcus to answer.

"Every citizen of the Kingdom is to be put to the test in one way or the other. One of the tests could well be that we are required to trust those whom the Kings and Priests have provided, so as to prove that we follow unconditionally. The Lord used the same method during the time of the Apostles. Then, if a man said that he followed the Lord, he was measured by whether he followed the Apostles. If he didn't accept them, he did not accept the Lord. Today, if we cannot accept the instructions given by the Kings and Priests through the Administrators, we cannot be said to be accepting the Kings and Priests unconditionally!"

Marcus hardly dared to breath, he wasn't sure of what he had just said - or if he had the right to say any such thing. Alexei murmured softly.

"Have we now been taught a new doctrine in these last days of the Kingdom, Marcus Steinbecker?"

Marcus cleared his throat.

"I suggest that this is a question which could be asked of our Kings and Priests!"

Alexei nodded.

"Might I suggest we arrange a series of conferences to look into the matter of joint participation in schemes along the Lena? Perhaps, we could profitably use our time in the next two days to set up working groups? Now, if you will excuse a tired old man, my minders want to put me to bed."

Those assembled at the table rose and the old man bade them a warm good night and then they were left to their own devices. The guests lingered but the subject of increased yields and storage wasn't broached again.

Marcus found himself describing Salem and the areas along the East

Siberian coast. It was obvious that many of them had never been further afield than the province in which they worked, or to meet Alexei in his headquarters. He wondered if it was a deliberate policy on the part of the old man - and then, he asked himself the question: how many of his own assistants in the more distant part of his responsibility, had the opportunity to do much else?

Later, he took a walk in the garden and thought over the after dinner conversation. There was no doubt that Alexei had engineered the entire episode. His reason for doing so was debatable. Marcus was reminded of Father Joel, it would have been the sort of tactic he would have employed under certain circumstances. Perhaps, it was a characteristic of the very old to be devious. Somehow, he thought there had to be more to it than that simple explanation. Alexei had wanted to force the subject out into the open. It looked as if he hadn't wished to be identified with either side of the argument.

Marcus found that he had wandered back into the rose bower. The heady scent of the blooms still lingered after the golden brightness of the day. He sat on the stone bench and wondered at the subconscious directive which had guided his steps in this direction. He was alone, he felt disappointed. It would have been very pleasant to have shared his thoughts with Leah, but he judged that she would have never allowed her thoughts to guide her in that direction, consciously or subconsciously.

He felt like a condemned man who knew the sentence was to be carried out in two days, but who hoped against hope that he would win a reprieve at the last moment. His longing for Leah had intensified. He tried to analyse it, perhaps it was the lure of the unattainable, it always seemed more attractive than that which was within reach. He tried to think of what he would

do if Leah decided reject his proposal. He came to the conclusion that he had no alternative plans, other than to wait out the last precious days of the Kingdom and then experience the consequences of Satan's release and the horrors which were sure to follow - and then - the culmination of the end of all things created.

It was this last concept which he had resolutely pushed away from his thoughts in the past. There had always been the preoccupation with the release of Satan and then the threat of Gog's Horde and what that meant for mankind - but there was something else - the termination of the physical creation - the end of all things and the fearful prospect of the Judgement. He tried to imagine the fear which would grip mankind. Even now, there was a resistance to the thought that the Kingdom would end. The resistance was borne out of the supposition that God in His mercy, would change His plans and allow the Kingdom to continue indefinitely. When mankind was brought to the realisation that the Time of Peace had ended with the release of Satan, it could well be that they would be gripped with terror, for they would then understand that the final chain of events had been set into motion. The chain of events which would culminate in the Second and General Resurrection, after which, all would stand before the Thrones and be Judged.

It was a morbid diet of thoughts upon which to go to bed and it was small wonder that Marcus found sleep impossible. He lay awake in the quiet house and listened to the noises from the fields. His thoughts would not move away from the subject of the End. His windows and doors were wide open and except to ensure privacy, were always so. There had never been any reason to close them against intruders - there were no thoughts of intrusion - or possessions. All things were held in common. How different it would be,

when men hid themselves away for fear of other men, or for fear that their goods would be stolen away. He tossed and turned and finally managed a few hours of fitful rest. He woke early, feeling tired and jaded, with a sour taste in his mouth. For once, he felt his age.

The two days which followed were quite unremarkable. He had a sensation of marking time. Alexei and his managers occupied their mornings with attending to correspondence and the affairs of the Administration. In the afternoons, there was a period of a few hours when inconclusive discussions took place between them all and half-hearted suggestions made about joint ventures along the Lena. Marcus soon formed the opinion that the prospect of any of the plans coming to fruition was remote.

He came to the conclusion that they had never been seriously considered by the old man. The reason for the invitation had nothing to do with a desire for the two districts to cooperate. It stood to reason that every opportunity had been explored centuries before. Joel would have seen to it that all viable proposals would have been considered. Some of the plans suggested by Alexei were almost impossible to carry through and would have required centuries of activity before dubious benefits could have been realised - and they didn't have centuries!

The more the discussions progressed, the more it became apparent to Marcus that the time which remained was pitifully short. At the end of the third day and facing the prospect of returning home on the next after a fruitless visit, Marcus walked in the garden again. Alexei had been 'captured' by his minders and taken off to bed. Leah had made her excuses and gone her own way.

On this occasion, he wasn't to be left alone. He soon became aware of someone following. He turned and waited for Georgi Malenski to catch up

with him. The dark, young man smiled fleetingly.

"I hope you don't mind, brother Marcus - I saw you walking in this direction and thought it might be a good opportunity to talk to you."

"By all means, brother Georgi, I'm glad of your company."

They walked further along the path in silence.

"Tomorrow, you return to Salem and soon after I return to the delta of the Lena."

"Yes, we go our separate ways and face the task of preparing for the End."

"The end of the Kingdom, you mean?"

"What else? The end of the Kingdom - and the turmoil which will ensue."

"So, it will really come?"

"Do you doubt it?"

He was silent for a while.

"Sometimes - perhaps for those who are older, it is easier to accept."

Marcus laughed softly.

"Do you think those who are older hold life any less dear than those who are young?"

Georgi glanced at him quickly.

"I am recently married, I have a young son - "

Marcus nodded.

"It might surprise you to know that I have plans to marry - and to have a family."

They marched on a few more paces.

"If you don't mind me saying so, I can't reconcile that with your view of an immediate end to the Kingdom and all that implies."

"The implication is that we can almost measure how much longer remains before we are faced with the Second Resurrection. We can't know exactly, but it is a very short time. I am reminded of a wise saying from the time of the Apostles. One was asked if provision should be made for the future in view of their belief that the Lord would come for them in the First Resurrection. His answer was, 'If I knew He was coming tomorrow, I would plant a tree today.' Perhaps, we can learn from that, brother Georgi."

There was another long silence.

"Does this explain the discussions we've been having about joint ventures - some of the suggestions sound like fantasies."

"Some of the suggestions sound as if they are born out of the thought that the Kingdom will continue for ever - I agree, they are fantasies! Our aim must be to fulfil the instruction to increase the yield and create additional storage. The Firstling told us to study the story of Joseph. His ability to store from the good years was limited, there were only seven fat years - years of plenty - then, the famine came - the lean years. Similarly, we have only a few harvests left before circumstances change and the citizens are faced with food shortages. We have no time for grandiose schemes, but we do have time to reap the last harvests of plenty."

They had come to the end of a walkway. Georgi stopped and extended his hand.

"I thank you for this opportunity to talk to you, brother Marcus. I value the thoughts you have expressed. I wish you well for your plans for the future."

"I have also enjoyed our conversation. God be with you, brother Georgi." Marcus watched him stride briskly away. His step had the purpose and resolution of youth. The problem remained as to whether that resolution and

purpose would remain correctly directed. A phrase turned over in his mind, it was a moment before he could place it in context. Georgi came from the northern lands, along the Arctic Ocean, the mouth of the Lena - the 'far recesses of the north!' The name 'Georgi' sounded uncomfortably like 'Gog'! He pushed the thought away and suddenly wished he was back in the comfortable surroundings of Salem, where everything was as it appeared on the surface. This land of Alexei Kharkov appeared to have hidden depths and potentials and led the thoughts to where they ought not to stray.

The last night in the home of Alexei was sustained at a light and pleasant level. Whatever their host had intended from the visit, had clearly been satisfied. Discussions had taken place, tentative plans for working groups had been contrived. There was sufficient directive for both Administrators to provide to their assistants. One thing Marcus did note was the prominence of Georgi Malenski in the major group who would study plans for the plains surrounding the delta of the Lena. He could have hardly been excluded in view of his managerial role in that area, but Marcus resolved to be especially careful of whom he delegated to be his representative.

There were general farewells, they would not meet again before their respective departures. Later, Marcus analysed his thoughts. The element of suspicion was already apparent in them. He was beginning to see Gog lurking behind every bush, as someone had once said - he might have even said it himself. He suspected Alexei of ulterior motives, hidden behind his sweetly, peaceful smile. He had the opinion that the remaining district managers had been waiting for him to make a mistake. He began to wonder, as well as becoming suspicious, he was also becoming paranoid. Yes! Indeed, he would be very glad to return to Salem, to be amongst those he could trust - and to await the verdict Leah was sure to deliver!

