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LION'S LAST DAYS

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*This excerpt is taken from Part I, Chapter 10 of the book *The Sons of Heaven and Earth*. In the first three sections of the chapter "Lion's Last Days", Herod, king of the Jews, appears as a very sick man. His physical and spiritual torments are further aggravated, when he hears rumors that a new Messiah has appeared with an armed band in the mountains. Herod orders his soldiers to destroy the band and to bring the Messiah to his palace alive. Meanwhile the Chief Priest of the Jews, Hannah, consoles Herod and assures him that the Messiah is just another pretender.*

IV

The same chamber. The king arrayed in a blue tunic, is sitting on a bench near the window. A red outer robe lies spread over his knees, and he constantly arranges it about his legs. The king is looking out the window.

HEROD. I am troubled, Greek. My soul is restless and this is why I have summoned you. (*Turning toward him*). You understand much, Greek, more than I, more than anyone else. What you have not gained through reason, you have gained by study.

NICHOLAS (*standing to one side*). Our great thinker, Socrates, who alone of all men has been called most wise by the eternal gods, has said: — I know only one thing, that I know nothing.

HEROD. Truly words of a wise man. Your wise men are strange, Greek. People say that they know the secrets of heaven and earth, yet they are not proud. They do not boast.

NICHOLAS. Our wise men truly try to understand and to explain the secrets which the gods on Olympus have tried to conceal from the mortal mind, and now many secrets are clear to us, but man's mind is too feeble to know and understand everything.

HEROD. Our wise men do not think this way. They are said to know everything that God knows and still more.

NICHOLAS. I have always believed firmly and constantly that He knows everything and He does not suffer anyone to deny this, my King. And so, I have seen, they always speak of their God by name.

HEROD. They vex me, Greek, and I cannot speak with them. I talk with you and am consoled.

NICHOLAS. I am your physician, my King. I heal not only your flesh, but even your spirit.

HEROD (*silent for a moment*). Tell me, Greek, what are men's dreams? Do the gods really send them as oracles to the living?

NICHOLAS. I think that there are such dreams. But, the eternal gods pay little heed to those living on earth and so such dreams are rare. Most often dreams are only painful vestiges of the affliction of a troubled soul.

HEROD. Do you think so? (*Lowering his head*). Perhaps what you say is true. (*Raising his head*). How can you shield yourself from them? How can you shield yourself so that they will not torture you, Greek?

NICHOLAS. Do not think about them and put everything which is unpleasant out of your mind quickly.

HEROD. It is easy for you to say this when your soul is peaceful. I cannot forget what lives constantly in my heart.

NICHOLAS. You must try to forget, my King.

HEROD. You say I must try? You cannot forget what you long for and if you try ... But, Greek, do you know what longing is?

NICHOLAS. Spiritual torment is joy, my King. Unhappy is he whose soul is not visited by spiritual longing.

HEROD. You have spoken well, Greek. There are dreams, my dreams, — my heart thirsts for them although they pain my soul. (*He tries to get up*). Help me to get up. I cannot stay in this place when I remember these things.

NICHOLAS (*remaining at hand*). Do not be troubled by dreams, my King. They are merely powerless shades of life.

HEROD (*slowly pacing up and down the chamber, softly, as if talking to himself*). O Mary, Mary, Joy of my heart. May your name be blessed, although you torture me constantly ... You torture me for sins I have stopped repenting. Torture, torture my soul more painfully. My soul finds repose only in pain. O Mary, Mary. (*He moves toward the bench, sits down, leans on it and covers his face with his hands. He is silent for a while, then he glances at Nicholas*). Listen, Greek, all night I dream of people who died long ago by my decree.

NICHOLAS. Their ghosts have not yet found peace. They have not forgotten the offenses committed against them.

HEROD. I have been awake all night tortured by this and even now I am not at rest.

NICHOLAS. The souls of the dead are powerless, Herod, and they cannot take vengeance on the living. They are only shades. You would be more prudent not to think of these things at all.

HEROD. Is it really so, Wiseman of the Greeks (*Turning to him*). Yet, I cannot doubt your words. It is close to the end of the fourth day since Abimelech left Jerusalem with Tracian, but I still have had no news. Perhaps, this Messiah really is a Man of God or the Chief Priest has deceived me by inviting a pretender.

NICHOLAS. What purpose could the Chief Priest have in deceiving you, my Lord.

HEROD. To hasten the vengeance of his God, Greek. You cannot trust the word of a Jew. (*Anxiously*). Perhaps my warriors are already killed and destroyed and the victor has entered Jerusalem, and I am here, confined to my sick-bed. I cannot move. No one can do anything, everyone is uncertain. No one can reckon with my impatience. O Greek, Greek, you cannot understand how difficult it is to rule people, who suffer.

NICHOLAS. Just so, My Lord. It is difficult for me to understand. I love my people. I love them so much — more than myself, more than my life.

HEROD. I too want to love. I thirst only after the good, yet it seems that only villains and ingrates dwell here. My soul is filled with contempt and today all that the Jews do prevents it from being obliterated from my heart. It grows constantly.

NICHOLAS. Where and when did this hero, if he is still alive, await the homage of his people. Forgive me, my King, if my words offend you'. I will not permit myself to hate those for whom I had to sacrifice all the strength of my life. I compelled myself to love them, although they would be thankless and hate me.

OSTARIUS (*entering, and standing on the threshold*). My Lord, Germanas, your commander, has returned. He is waiting in the vestibule.

HEROD (*Getting up suddenly*). He has returned? Alone? Defeated?

OSTARIUS (*Barely managing to restrain a smile, joyfully*). No, my Lord, he had brought slaves ...

NICHOLAS. You see, my King! You worried about these dreams in vain ...

HEROD (*to Ostarius*). Let him come in. Let him come in at once. (*Sitting down, to Nicholas*). You told the truth, Greek. The shades of the dead are powerless and you should not heed their threats. (*To Germanas, entering and bowing to the King*.) I have awaited you impatiently, my soldier. Tell me, with what news will you gladden my heart?

GERMANAS. I have accomplished what you ordered, my King, more quickly than I could have hoped.

HEROD (*impatiently*). Tell me, now.

GERMANAS. On the evening of the first day I reached a place where the rebels were gathered. Only a small group of them resisted. Others got away taking advantage of the darkness of the night.

HEROD. How did you deal with those who resisted?

GERMANAS. Everyone who did not escape perished for they defended themselves courageously. Only one fell into my hands alive.

HEROD. Did you order him to be killed?

GERMANAS. No, my King, I learned from him where those who had fled to the mountains had hidden.

HEROD. Ah, Wretches! You say you learned from him? Did you force him to tell you?

GERMANAS. When I promised him life and liberty in your name, he led us to the mountains Where the others were hidden ...

HEROD. You have acted imprudently, soldier, promising liberty in my name to one who deserves crucifixion.

GERMANAS. Without it I could not have accomplished what I did, my King. I overwhelmed the rebels and brought their leader to you.

HEROD. You could have tortured him.

GERMANAS. I am soldier unused to torturing those who have fallen captive, my King.

HEROD. Ah, is that so? I had forgotten that you are not a Jew. Show me that man, betrayer of his friends. I want to see him. Or perhaps you have freed him?

GERMANAS. I did not dare to free him without your knowledge. He is here at the entrance of your house. But, my King, will you refuse to fulfill my promise?

HEROD. No one has the right to question the king's actions, soldier.

Germanas casts a glance at the king, turns around and goes out, Soon he returns with a captive whose hands are bound. The captive, seeing that he is in the presence of the king, falls on his knees.

GERMANAS. Here is the man you want to see, my King.

HEROD (*he looks at the captive for a moment, silently*). Who are you? What is your name, you scoundrel?

JUDAS ISCARIOT (*kneeling*). I am Judas Iscariot, my Lord.

HEROD. Do not dare to insult my name by calling me your lord. Are you not a follower of this Messiah?

JUDAS ISCARIOT. No. It was enough that I was called mad, which I am not.

HEROD. But were you not mad enough to be with the rebels?

JUDAS. How can a Jew not answer the Messiah when he calls in the name of the Eternal One?

HEROD. Yet you have betrayed him. You have given your friends into my soldiers' hands. You have betrayed Jews to Edomites.

JUDAS. It isn't that at all, Source of my life. I was only appealing to the Most High to make manifest that this man, who is called the Messiah, truly is His Chosen One. The Eternal One has given no answer. I am not at fault if all are still uncertain.

HEROD. Your words are cunning and twisted, Jew. Speak directly so that I can understand you.

JUDAS. This Messiah says that the Powers of Heaven will give us fortune and because of this we stood in combat bravely, yet, we lost and I fell into your hands. This is what I thought: the Powers of Heaven did not help us because the Chosen One was not with us. I placed him in danger then the Powers of Heaven would have to help him win the new battles. But Heaven did not come to his aid. And so, he is not the Messiah and I am not guilty of a lie in the eyes of the Eternal One.

HEROD. Your tongue is sly, Jew. It accuses you more than your deeds. In my eyes you deserve crucifixion.

JUDAS (*falling at the king's feet*). My Lord, have mercy! It was promised to me and I trusted...

HEROD (*kicking him away*). Out of the way, you dog, do not touch my feet! He promised you life and freedom in my name and so I absolve you from punishment — you may go now, a free man. But take care lest you fall into my hands again: if you do, I will show no mercy. (*To his soldiers who lead Judas away*). Throw this scoundrel out and keep him outside of gates. Now! (*The soldiers grab hold of Judas, and, without giving him a chance to stand up, drag him through the door. Herod smiles maliciously*). Bring in the one who was their leader. Immediately!

GERMANAS. You will see him in a moment, my King. (*Goes out*).

NICHOLAS. Just as you were merciful to this one, my King, be merciful to the other, also. In this you will soften his heart.

HEROD. Be merciful to a seditious Jew who longed for my death, who despised me? Never! He would only use my mercy for evil.

GERMANAS (*entering*). Here he is, the leader of the band which I destroyed by your order. (*A guard leads the Messiah in. His hands are bound, around his neck is a rope, the end of which is held by one of the soldiers*). On your knees, Wretch! You are standing in the presence of your ruler.

MESSIAH (*standing proudly*). It is said: Thou shalt bow only to the Lord God. Here I see only his enemies.

HEROD (*silent for a moment, maliciously looking at the captive, standing quietly*). Are you the Messiah?

MESSIAH. You have said it.

HEROD. You have proclaimed yourself a king and a liberator. You have promised to conquer me. You have found me guilty of death. But, it is you the Eternal One has delivered into my hands.

MESSIAH. It was to test your soul, Idumean, that the Eternal One has delivered me into your hands.

HEROD. So you have taken a liking to tests, scoundrels! One tries to test his God, and now another wished to test me!...

MESSIAH. Bow and call me your lord. Then you will find mercy in the eyes of the Eternal One.

HEROD (*to Nicholas*). Did you hear what he said, Greek? What do you think? Is one who speaks in this way worthy of mercy? (*To Germanas*). What does this scoundrel deserve for his words, my warrior?

GERMANAS. Death, my King.

NICHOLAS. It is not he, but senseless youth speaking through his lips. (*To the captive*). Fall at the king's feet and ask for mercy!...

MESSIAH. My life and death are in the hand of the Eternal One and only to Him can my soul bow, Edomite.

HEROD (*smiling*). Your friends destroyed my house in Jerusalem and the king's throne within it. You will have to be satisfied with a simple chair, Messiah. (*To his soldiers*). Sit him on the chair. (*The soldiers drag him into the middle of the room and sit him on the chair*). Cover his shoulders with the king's purple. Here now! (*He throws into their hands the robe with which his legs had been covered. The soldiers place it on the captive's shoulders*). Now, everyone, fall on your knees and honor him as your ruler. (*Everyone looks at each other in amazement, Germanas alone smiles*). What, don't you want to acknowledge your ruler? (*Finally, everyone bursts out laughing*). See, Messiah, no one here wants to acknowledge you as king.

MESSIAH. The hour will come, sooner than you think, when the Eternal One will mock you as you have now mocked me, Idumean.

HEROD. But you will no longer await that hour. It is a pity that Abimelech is not here. He would devise for you a death, which would make you feel that you are dying. But we shall not wait any longer... (*To his soldiers*). Lead him out, flog him, and nail him to the cross.

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