



Fourth Dawn



BOOK FOUR
 A.D. CHRONICLES®

Fourth Dawn



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*For Laurie Potratz, with love . . .
and ten pounds of See's chocolate!*

God said, “Let there be lights in the expanse of the sky to separate the day from the night, and let them serve as signs to mark seasons and days and years, and let them be lights in the expanse of the sky to give light on the earth.” And it was so. God made two great lights—the greater light to govern the day and the lesser light to govern the night. He also made the stars. God set them in the expanse of the sky to give light on the earth, to govern the day and the night, and to separate light from darkness. And God saw that it was good. And there was evening, and there was morning—the FOURTH DAWN.

GENESIS 1:14-19

Prologue

Dawn. A sky the color of a crimson apple ripening above the world.

“Get up. Don’t be afraid,” said the Incarnate One who had by His word created the rising sun and the heavens and the earth.

Yeshua was Himself again. Or . . . no. Rather, He was the human part of Himself again. He was—or rather, He seemed—ordinary. Mary’s son. Like any mother’s son.

But the three talmidim trembling before Him had witnessed His transfiguration from mere human to something beyond their understanding. The thunderous voice of the Almighty had silenced their foolish comments. The booming words of the Almighty Father had rattled their bones and flattened them on the ground: **This is my beloved Son! I am well pleased with him! Listen to him!**¹

Peter, Ya’acov, and John had seen Yeshua’s true identity revealed: Who He always was before time. Who He is now. Who He will be when time ceases to exist.

Yeshua, Messiah, had stood face-to-face talking with Mosheh, the lawgiver, and Elijah, the prophet, who never died. The three had discussed Yeshua’s exodus from the world of men and time. His terrified talmidim had witnessed something amazing: They had seen Yeshua

transformed! No longer ordinary human flesh, He shone like molten silver, eternally alive, shimmering like the sun upon a vast sea!

And then afterwards Yeshua said, “Don’t be afraid.”

“*Don’t be afraid?*” He must have been joking.

Their knees were weak as they followed Him. They dared not speak as He led them down toward the plain. The earth, hidden beneath a layer of clouds, seemed as though it was covered in water.

A hawk cried and spiraled above their heads. A covey of quail, startled by footsteps, burst from the brush.

Yeshua looked over His shoulder at their ashen faces. Were they still too shaken to notice the beauty of the sunrise?

His eyes twinkled with amusement.

He could have been every man’s son.

Any man’s brother.

The son of Mary.

The events of last night left no doubt that He was also the only Son of The One who had thundered from the cloud.

Gravel clattered from the narrow path into the ravine below. Yeshua instructed them, “Don’t tell anyone what you have seen, until the Son of Man has been raised from the dead.”²²

“*Raised from the dead?*” Why did that phrase not elicit a flood of questions?

Ah, well. Like the covey of quail, Peter’s thoughts scattered, and the minds of his companions flew after.

Curiosity turned to Mosheh and Elijah, the two men who had coalesced from thin air to converse with Yeshua.

Mosheh, the lawgiver. Elijah, the prophet. In the flesh?

Peter skipped over the part Yeshua had mentioned about Himself being raised from the dead, which implied Yeshua would actually die. Peter ignored the part when the voice of Yahweh had spoken, interrupting his prattle. Peter asked, “Why then do the teachers of the law say that Elijah must come first?”²³

Yeshua replied, “They are right. True. To be sure, it is written by the prophet Malachi that Elijah will come first and will restore all things. But pay attention to what I am telling you. Elijah has already come, only they did not recognize him. They have done to him everything they wished. In the same way, the Son of Man is going to suffer at their hands.”²⁴

It seemed that Peter had momentarily learned his lesson not to contradict Yeshua. There was no follow-up query on that subject. *You? Suffer like Yochanan? You? First Light of Dawn? Gleaming Daybreak? Shining Star of Righteousness? You? Who illuminates the dark night of men's souls? You? Suffer at the hands of the same dissipated, ignorant louts who silenced Yochanan the Baptizer for the sake of a dancing girl's whim?*

These were not questions Yeshua's disciples asked Him. Perhaps because they could not fathom the possibility that the Messiah, Son of the Most High God, Lord of all the Angel Armies, could be injured by a drunken, lecherous tyrant like Herod Antipas. Perhaps now they understood and believed that Yochanan the Baptizer truly was the Elijah—the long-awaited fulfillment in the very last two verses of the scroll of Malachi.⁵ Yochanan the Baptizer was indeed the subject of the Malachi prophecy.

Yeshua often told them that no man ever born of woman was greater than Yochanan.⁶ *“And yet, tsaowr, the youngest child, in the kingdom of olam haba is greater than Yochanan.”*

A child? The least? The smallest? The youngest? The most vulnerable? *Tsaowr*? So near to the word *tsara*, the word for leper. So, an infant without value to the world was greater than Yochanan? And Yochanan, the Elijah, was Yeshua's second-in-command, the messenger sent ahead to announce the coming of Messiah?⁷

The disciples as yet did not understand how a little child could be greater than Yochanan if Yochanan was the greatest man ever born of woman. How could a baby be as exalted as Elijah or Mosheh on the mountain? They had no real answers that first dawn as they paused to pick Peniel, the man born blind who now could see, off the ground and collected the others who had spent the night waiting for Yeshua to return with an army to conquer the world.

And later that day, when Yeshua pointed at Mount Hermon and explained to them that faith could move a mountain of evil and dump it into the sea, they did not understand what He meant.⁸ Several among them spent the morning summoning their faith and then commanding stones to fly in the name of Yeshua. The stones were not impressed.

The talmidim longed for the kind of clarity that would support their ideas. *Their* ideas of how things should be. Not God's ideas. They did not really want to know the truth. Not really. They wanted Herod Antipas deposed. They wanted their own king. They wanted the

Romans soundly beaten and Rome leveled by fire from heaven. Therefore they did not ask questions that, if answered, would have made a different kind of sense out of the purpose of the birth and incarnation of Messiah.

“Suffer,” He said. *Hmm.*

You? First Dawn rising on eternity? You? Messiah! Son of Man! Suffer at the hands of men? But WHY?

No, they did not ask this question. Nobody asked WHY He had to suffer. And they secretly wished Yeshua would stop talking about the suffering part of it.



A few weeks had passed since the transfiguration of Yeshua from mortal to immortal, then back to mortal again. But Peniel had not stopped dreaming of the thunder. It made him sweat. Often he awoke with his heart beating like a drum at the thought of his own unholiness.

For a time, the three disciples who had been with Yeshua on the mountain—Peter, Ya’acov, and John—were more quiet than usual. And, as Yeshua instructed, they did not speak of what they had seen to anyone.

On occasion they discussed it among themselves. Peniel saw them, heads together, whispering. Always whispering.

Peniel, who had witnessed the revelation uninvited and from a distance, did not reveal what he had seen and heard and felt. He carried the knowledge of it, the terror of it, alone.

Now Peter was again as blustery as ever. Ya’acov and John appeared to have forgotten the event.

But Peniel’s hands still shook when Yeshua came near. He bowed in nervous bobs and backed away from Yeshua, like a court jester leaving a king’s throne room.

Peniel had not heard Yeshua’s command not to be afraid. And how well he remembered what awesome power was locked inside Yeshua’s seemingly ordinary flesh.

Hidden behind hands and feet and a face and skin was the very One whose first word had commanded *LIGHT!*⁹

His second word had been *GOOD!*¹⁰

Too soon he had spoken the word *MAN!*¹¹

And after the word *man*, things had become difficult and complicated because every man secretly wanted to be God. Every man wanted to give the orders.

Peniel lay down in terror each night and stared up at the stars. He wondered what great command the Incarnate Word would issue when He stripped off His disguise and once again revealed His glory to all men.

Don't speak the next word yet, Yeshua. I'm not ready for it! Please. Call me to you with a smile and the crook of a finger. Don't speak! I am afraid of the fourth word!

At last Yeshua took notice of Peniel's strange behavior. It was back in Caesarea Philippi at the wedding of Alexander the Flute Maker to Zahav, daughter of Rabbi Eliyahu.

Old friends of the family had come from as far away as Alexandria to attend.

Alexander sat in a chair and played his flute. Peniel and several other strong fellows lifted him up, chair and all, and passed him around above them.

The women danced on one side of the partition while all the men danced on the other side. Yeshua, spinning in circles, laughing, danced with four-year-old Hero, son of Alexander, high upon His shoulders.

It was plain that Yeshua liked weddings. Peniel wondered, *Did Yeshua dance at the first wedding ever? The one in the Garden?*

Yeshua looked so ordinary, Peniel thought, stepping out of the line of dancers when Yeshua came near. How could the King of Heaven continue to live among men and pretend that He was not the creator of mankind and the inventor of weddings?

The dancing continued, joyful. No one in a hurry to stop.

Peniel staggered back to the table to find his cup of wine amidst the clutter of the banquet. He was hot. Someone had pinched his cup, so he chose another full one and quaffed deeply. Good wine. Very good. Peniel scanned the table, spotted another full cup, and drained it dry. He wiped his lips with the back of his hand and was near to picking up a third.

Suddenly he felt a hand on his shoulder.

A voice spoke his name. "Peniel?"

It was The Voice! Yeshua!

Peniel flinched and knocked over a bottle, which fell into a plate of hummus, which splashed on his clothes.

Peniel began to bow and bob. “Yes. Yes . . . yes . . . Lord.”

Yeshua threw back His head and laughed a huge laugh. Why did the stars not spin like tops at such a laugh?

“Peniel.” Yeshua cupped Peniel’s face in both hands. “You knew who I was before you saw me on the mountain.”

Peniel closed his eyes. “Yes, but . . . I hadn’t seen you as you really are!”

“Open your eyes,” Yeshua said gently.

Peniel obeyed.

Yeshua was still grinning as if He might burst into laughter again. “Peniel, do not be afraid. This is who I am for the present. Do not be afraid.”

“I can’t help it.”

“Why are you afraid?”

“Because you’re not at all what you seem. I saw you as you are.”

“Peniel. Have you forgotten? I was a baby born just like you.” He put a hand on Peniel’s brow. “There, now, do not be afraid. I was born just like any man.”

At His words it was as though warm oil poured over Peniel’s head, soothing his spirit all the way to his toes. No, it was not the wine. It was the Word that calmed him.

Peniel said, “Heh. Well, all right. If you say so. I won’t be afraid.”

“Good.” Yeshua patted his back. “I have a job for you, eh?”

“A job?”

“Only for you, my friend. You see, gathered here at this wedding are some who remember what happened. They recall the birth of my cousin Yochanan. Zadok is somewhere; I saw him dancing. Yes, there he is. And his elder brother, Onias, just arrived from Alexandria, is in the house now. A very important part of the story. Onias’ daughter is speaking to my mother, telling her they have finally made it. Oh yes, they all remember the details of the last days of old Herod. Thirty years it has been and a little more. And they will be ready to sit and talk awhile. Someone needs to collect the stories. Can you do that?”

“Oh, Lord, you know me! I’m Peniel! I love a good story!”

“And I love a good wedding.”

For just a moment Peniel imagined Yeshua, the great and glorious

Yeshua of the shining Mountain, standing as Rabbi before the first couple. Peniel blurted, “Lord, please tell me, then. I must know! Was there a wedding canopy in Eden?”

His laugh! Oh, such a laugh. Did the stars shine more brightly when Yeshua laughed?

He answered Peniel softly, “Such a good question. You always ask such good questions. The first wedding canopy? Yes, there was a chuppah in the first wedding.” Yeshua spread His arms wide and stood on His tiptoes to demonstrate a very tall chuppah. “The canopy was the outstretched wings of the groomsmen. You see, the archangels Michael and Gabriel stood as witnesses to the first marriage. One on one side, one on the other side. Very tall. Their wing tips touched above the heads of the bride and groom. Yes, like that. You see, I’m not the only one who likes a good wedding. Now go tell Zadok that his brother has arrived.” Yeshua gave Peniel a little nudge.

Peniel, calm for the first time in weeks, hailed Zadok, the old shepherd of Beth-lehem. A giant of a man, with a patch on his left eye and arms like the branches of an oak, waved at Peniel as he sat and chatted amiably with a man half his size and half his age.

Beads of perspiration stood out on Zadok’s brow. “I’m not the dancer I used to be! But my boys! My boys!” He waved toward the three little boys who played a game of tag in the midst of the whirling dancers. “They’ll not give in till the sun peeps up in the mornin’.”

Peniel broke in. “Zadok, sorry. Sorry. Yeshua told me I should tell you your brother’s arrived.”

Zadok sprang to his feet. “My brother? Here?”

“Inside, Yeshua said. I’d rather listen than dance. I can’t dance anyway. So if you don’t mind—”

“Praise be to the Eternal. I sent word to Onias months ago. Thirty years it’s been! Thirty years and more since I laid eyes on him! I’d almost given up hope.”

“And Yeshua told me to ask you questions about what happened in the last days of old Herod the Butcher.”

“No need to ask questions! We’ll be talking all night! Aye! Thirty years to make up for.” Zadok dashed into the house. “Brother! Brother!”

“We’re in here,” the mother of Yeshua called to them from a bed-chamber. “Me and Menorah too! They’ve come a long way!”

Zadok grasped the door frame of the room where his brother lay. Half in and half out of the room, Zadok seemed to take in the pitiful sight, as though he did not recognize the person who was his brother.

“Zadok?” The word was feeble.

The familiar voice broke through. Zadok burst into tears. “Onias! Onias!” Weeping, Zadok fell to his knees beside the bed, where an old man lay propped up on pillows. The two brothers were a sharp contrast: Zadok, strong and hearty; Onias, like a brittle leaf that might crumble and blow away at any moment. His hands were clawlike and bore terrible scars through the centers of his palms. His skin was yellowed parchment. Cheeks sunken and eyes blue-white with cataracts.

The brothers embraced. Menorah began to weep as her uncle pulled her into their circle. “Menorah! Your aunt Rachel is gone these two years past. Ah, that she could have lived to see the both of you!”

Mary, eyes shining, looked on, drinking it in.

Thirty years was a long time to be apart.

Peniel, not wanting to intrude, backed away and lingered outside in the corridor while the two men, Mary, and Onias’ daughter, Menorah, related the news of recent months. Onias and Menorah told how long it had taken to travel by ship from Alexandria and where they had stayed on the way to Caesarea Philippi.

Zadok spoke of Herod Antipas, the death of Yochanan the Baptist, and the corruption that had once again soiled Jerusalem and swept across Eretz-Israel.

“Like in the days of the old butcher king, eh, Zadok?” Onias wheezed.

“Aye. Very like. Thirty-some years. A snap of the fingers.”

Just then Mary said to the brothers, “There is one who will hear and remember.” She popped her head out the door. “Peniel! Yeshua says you are a fellow who knows how to ask good questions.”

“I listen better than I dance. That’s true,” Peniel said.

Zadok shouted that Peniel should enter and not stand outside like a ninny when Yeshua had commanded him to record the story of his brother and Mary and himself.

Peniel tried not to stare at the disfigured hands of the old man in the bed when he came into the room.

“Honored sir.” Peniel bowed slightly. Then, to the daughter, who

was a pear-shaped, golden-haired woman in her midthirties, “And you, honored daughter of Zadok’s brother.”

Zadok leaned close to his brother. “Never mind that y’ cannot see him. He’s a scrap of a lad. A good fellow. Used to be a blind beggar at Nicanor Gate but can see like a hawk now. And what a head for stories he has.”

Onias chuckled. “Well now, well. So you are the one. We heard about you even in Alexandria.”

“Yes, sir. I’m Peniel. I was blind, but now I see.”

Mary showed Peniel to a desk in the corner.

Zadok growled, “You’ll have to listen at top speed, boy, if you want to get all the details. We have a lot to catch up on.”

After that, Peniel’s presence was hardly noticed. The brothers took up their conversation where they had left off thirty years before.

“As I was sayin’”—Zadok scowled—“very little changed after thirty-odd years. It was a time, that was! Oh, it was a time! Only difference is, now the sons of the butcher king are even more corrupt than their father, Herod, was.”

Onias wagged his head slowly. “Not possible, Zadok. In all the history of Israel, there’s not been a king so corrupt as Herod the Great.”

Peniel, who knew the treachery of Antipas, old Herod’s son, frowned at that assertion.

Zadok scoffed. “Never any as bad as old Herod? I may differ on that point! Ahab, in the days of the first Elijah! Now Ahab, there was a devil in man’s skin.”

“No, not even Ahab can match Herod the Butcher King! In the days the second Elijah was born, not even Ahab could match the devil.” Onias held his claw up to the light. “What do you say, Mary?”

Mary raised her eyebrows slightly before she spoke. “I agree. Hmm, I do. Not even Ahab. I remember it well, that year. Though I was only a girl. David’s tomb. The genealogy records in the Temple. What a time it was.”

“Aye, I’ll concede to it.” Zadok stuck out his lower lip and glowered at Peniel. “Herod the Great was tyrant over our people. It was the year our Elijah came. Elijah. Have you got that, boy?”



PART I

See, I will send you the prophet Elijah before that great and dreadful day of the LORD comes. He will turn the hearts of the fathers to their children, and the hearts of the children to their fathers; or else I will come and strike the land with a curse.

MALACHI 4:5-6

I

CHAPTER

Tovah found the baby early one morning in a ravine beside the road as she traveled home to Jerusalem. With her was her husband, Onias, a young rabbi who made his living teaching Torah school.

A thin, bleating cry emanated from beneath the seven-branched sage.

“Onias? What’s that?” Tovah stopped and peered over the embankment. Other travelers surged past, not hearing or noticing what Tovah had plainly heard.

“Just a baby goat.” Onias took her arm and urged her to press along. “The mother’s nearby, no doubt. They never leave the kids for long. Come on then, Tovah! I have a meeting with Simeon and Zachariah before our course begins in the morning.”

A reedy cry, so human, drifted up.

“I have to see.” Tovah started down the faint track.

Onias shrugged impatiently and planted himself on the verge of the highway as she picked her way down the ravine.

The rustling of brush. Where was the creature? Had the mother hidden it?

“Tovah?” Onias called.

She waited, held her breath, listening. Pilgrims' voices, laughter, and feet crunching on gravel nearly drowned out the weak mewling of the thing.

Then, beside the boulder, the low branches of the sagebush trembled. As Tovah crooned, "Where are you, then?" the timid cry erupted into a bellow of infant rage.

This was no goat! Tovah knelt and pulled back the brush to reveal a baby girl, kicking and squirming in the dirt.

She was only hours old. The cord was uncut and still attached to the afterbirth. She was unwashed and caked with blood. She had not been rubbed with salt, anointed with oil, or swaddled in cloth.

"Onias!" Tovah cried. "Hurry!"

He scrambled down the path to her side, knelt, and gasped at the sight. Missing, for once, was his usual crooked smile. Plain enough, the infant had been abandoned, meant to die of exposure to the elements. Such barbarity was common in Rome among the poor or prostitutes. It was more unusual here in Judea, but rumor was that east of the Jordan unwanted infants were still sacrificed to the fires of Molech.

"Poor thing! Poor little thing! Who would do such a thing? Where is your mother?" Tovah unlaced her sandal. "Onias, your knife!" First tying the cord, Tovah cut it and scooped the infant up in her shawl. She cradled her.

Tiny fists flailed angrily. The back of the child's head fit perfectly in the palm of Tovah's hand. Ten toes. Ten fingers. Perfect! Perfect! And Tovah knew. She was certain. This was the child she had prayed for daily through seven years of miscarriages and stillborn sons!

Somehow the infant knew as well. She fell silent, calmed by Tovah's touch.

"A beautiful child," Tovah said in awe. "Look, Onias! She turns her face to my breast. She's hungry."

"How will she eat?"

"There's a woman on Tinsmith Street whose son is nearly weaned. She let it be known she would like work as a wet nurse."

"Yes. Zadok will be coming to Yerushalayim today also. I'll tell him we need a good milk goat, eh?" Onias put his hand on Tovah's back and gazed down at the child. "She will be fair. Look there! Her eyes are blue—like yours, Tovah. And her hair. Tovah! Golden, like yours."

So Onias and Tovah took the foundling home. They named her

Menorah, because they had found her under the seven-branched sage that resembled the candlestick in the Temple.

Onias and Tovah raised Menorah as their own daughter. She thrived and grew until, by the age of four, she was reading Hebrew as well as any student among Onias' eight-year-old Torah schoolboys.

Everyone in the neighborhood forgot that Menorah had been found beneath a seven-branched sagebush. Her name took on the meaning of the golden candlestick—light and warmth and holiness before the Lord. Her hair was like finely spun gold; her eyes innocent and as blue as the sky.

“Tovah! Your little girl looks just like you,” the women in synagogue remarked. “Have you ever seen a child so much like her mother?”

And, like her father, Menorah had a heart for God. She made up songs about angels and heaven as she played at her papa's feet. She spoke often and out loud to the Almighty about every concern and joy. Quick to make friends, Menorah was her father's pride and her mother's comfort.

“Such a gift,” Onias remarked to Tovah on the fourth anniversary of her birth and the discovery. It was the day before Onias began his priestly duty serving at the Temple as part of the course of Abijah.

That morning Tovah counted out four new silver temple shekels that she had earned washing the linen clothes of priests. She slid the coins across the table to Onias. “Please, Onias. Take these today for the treasury for the poor . . . as a thank offering to the Merciful One for every year of Menorah's life with us.”

Onias and Tovah laid hands upon the head of their sleeping child and prayed, “Blessed are you, O Adonai, who heard our prayers and remembered to have mercy on us when we had no children. Blessed are you who sent us Menorah to lighten our days! Omaine!”



It was the darkest part of a moonless autumn night in this, the thirtieth year of the Roman-backed reign of Herod the Idumean over the Jewish nation of Judea. In Jerusalem there remained at least an hour until cockcrow.

It was the watch when men's souls remained connected to their

bodies by the slenderest of threads. It was the season when courage often failed.

In the depths of the Kidron Valley, hundreds of feet below the Temple's pinnacle, a dog barked once, then yowled. Its wail stopped abruptly.

Absolute stillness settled again over Jerusalem.

The aroma of hot blood and charred meat from the day's sacrifices hovered about the armed men like an unseen cloud. The platform of the Temple had long since been sluiced clean and the paving stones scrubbed, but here on a platform, below the brow of the Mount, the thick odor lingered.

The charged air hung heavy around the thirteen watchers, making it difficult for them to breathe. Like the atmosphere, the quiet was oppressive. But no one spoke. Their silence was ordered by the tall, lean figure commanding the nocturnal foray.

Herod, aging king of the Jews and friend of the Roman emperor Caesar Augustus, stood wrapped in a hooded cloak, concealing him from ears to ankles. He was flanked by two of his personal bodyguards, Odus and Silus. These companions-in-arms were supplemented by a troop of ten soldiers from Herod's Idumean homeland.

The monarch's keen, black eyes peered into the west. Saturn had just set—one less witness to Herod's nocturnal undertaking.

The king was not superstitious. Besides, after a reign of nearly thirty years, he was powerful enough to carry out his plan in broad daylight. Both statements were lies.

Lately Herod had been troubled by dreams. In some he saw again the ghost of his wife Mariamme, whose execution Herod had ordered twenty years ago. In his sleep he heard again her ignored protests of innocence, her disregarded pleas for mercy. In some nightmares Herod himself was the target of assassination attempts. He woke panting for breath and drenched in sweat.

He shook off the memories.

Herod was glad neither Jupiter nor Saturn, or any of the gods, remained in the sky to observe him. He was also relieved that the God of the Jews, the occupant of the marble-and-gold-covered sanctuary on the hilltop, had apparently gone to sleep for the night.

Herod reckoned if he offended either the gods of the Romans or

the One God of the Jews, he would just make it up by additional sacrifices.

Soon there would be plenty of gold with which to buy the lambs and the bullocks . . . and the compliance of the priests.

There was another reason for the secretive nature of this expedition. It was not that Herod cared a fig for public opinion. His was an absolute monarchy, subject only to the approval of Rome.

But therein lay the rub: Herod did not want a repeat of the riots and mass crucifixions and the possibility of armed intervention by the Romans. Public outrage was certain to follow this night's proceedings. But if nothing was actually seen happening, then the reports could be ascribed to rumor.

Intimidation would take care of the rest.

However, Herod's air of satisfaction was disturbed when he turned eastward. There, newly risen over the mountains of Moab, hovered Sirius, the star the Hebrews called The Guardian.

Hundreds of years earlier the blind Greek poet Homer had written of Sirius: "Whose burning breath taints the red air with fevers, plagues and death."

Herod shivered inside his cloak, straightened his creaking back, then growled to Odus, "It is late enough. We go now."

Torches were produced from inside a guard tower, melting the mass of men and shadows into a molten pool flowing down the Temple steps. Five heavily armed men preceding and five following, flanked on either side by attendants of undoubted loyalty, Herod was at the center of an entourage of protection.

But he did not feel secure even so. Innuendo and scandal were rife around Herod's palace: half brothers at each other's throats, plots being hatched, poisonings contrived. Betrayal and suspicion were the coin of the realm.

Herod swayed briefly, experiencing that momentary dizziness from which he suffered more and more frequently as he neared his sixty-fifth birthday.

Who would succeed him when he was dead? One of his sons: Antipater? Alexander? Aristobulus? One of the others?

How many of them would willingly slit another's throat to clear the line of succession?

And would the heir be willing to wait for Herod . . . or would he try to hurry things along?

And among the common people? More mutterings about their longed-for Messiah, their liberator, their heir of King David, who would set the world right.

The recent years had been lean in Judea. Roman demands for tribute grew ever heavier; so did the requirements of Herod's ambitious building projects. More payments flowed out than taxes and customs duties brought in.

Gold was necessary to purchase security. More gold than remained in the treasury. More than could be extorted from High Priest Boethus and his cadre of Temple officials. More than could be wrung out of the *am ba aretz*, the impoverished people of the land.

Gold would pay more Syrian archers, more Samaritan swordsmen. More gold crossing more palms would uncover more plots, purchase more allegiance.

And Herod knew where to find it.

Partway along the curving, cobbled path skirting the eastern wall of the Ophel Quarter the street climbed again, ascending the hill identifying the ancient City of David.

Halfway down the stretch of King David's capital was the shepherd-king's tomb.

Set into the side of the eastward-facing slope, fronted by granite columns, the bronze door of the crypt displayed the royal seals of both David and his successor-son, Solomon.

At a peremptory gesture from the king, four of the guards shucked their cloaks, revealing stout iron bars slung alongside their short swords. They went to work, prying out the bronze rods that sealed the tomb's entrance from their masonry settings.

Chipping and cracking sounds splintered the night. The other guards scrutinized the deserted streets, ready to challenge and disperse anyone roused by the noise.

Herod broke his own rule of silence by muttering to Silus, "Nothing to be afraid of. Hyrcanus helped himself to some of the gold a hundred years ago. Scribes claim he saw much more than he removed. Much more!"

The last rod clanged to the pavement.

Odus stepped forward. With a single heave of his shoulder he levered open the catch holding the bolt and shot it back.

The way in was open.

Herod impatiently gestured Odus and Silus onward.

The two soldiers exchanged a glance before Silus thrust his torch into the antechamber of the tomb. Fine dust covered the floor. Except for a pair of stone benches, the room was empty.

Silus moved to the next vault. Over his shoulder he said, "I see a gold-covered chair. A throne? Silver bowls. The walls are hung with bronze shields."

"And coins? Chests of coins?" Herod demanded.

"No, nothing like that."

"Go farther in!" Herod stepped past the entry to urge his bodyguards to hurry their search.

Odus drew himself shoulder to shoulder with Silus. The flames of their torches flickered in the draft coming from the outside.

The combined light revealed another inner room. Over the doorway hung a round golden shield inscribed with the six-pointed Mogen David. Around this artifact were carved representations of a shepherd's crook crossed with a scepter. On the other side was inscribed the figure of a lyre supporting a crown.

The view through the portal displayed a pair of raised platforms. On one was a bronze coffin; on the other, a marble sarcophagus.

"Burial chamber of the kings," Silus murmured.

Four narrow openings branched off from the tomb. The fitful gleams of the torches did not penetrate any of the side cavities.

"Go on!" Herod hissed. "What are you waiting for?"

Odus put his foot on the sill.

The torch flames reversed direction as a wispy breeze from inside the grave whispered out. Fiery fingers reached toward Odus' face, making him duck his head aside.

Silus stuck out his hand, thrusting his light past the doorway and into the chamber.

From floor and ceiling, from both sides of the portal, sheets of brilliant white fire, dazzling the eyes, leapt across the opening. Curtains of flames enveloped Odus and Silus. Their robes blazed upward in an instant. So did their hair and beards.

Their screams were cut off by the sound of a furnace's roar.

The inferno's heat drove the horrified onlookers back.

The two lifeless bodies fell to the floor, and the flames were snuffed out as quickly as they had appeared.

Herod screamed, then whimpered, clawing his way out of the crypt. "Drag them out! Seal it up!" he shrieked. "Marble! I will build a marble monument!" Facing the Temple, he cried, "Do you hear? A marble monument!"

There was no reply. Over his shoulder the accusing eye of The Guardian star followed Herod all the way back to his palace, where he drank himself to sleep.



*Ecbatana, Kingdom of Parthia
29th year of King Phraates IV
Journal of Court Astronomer Melchior
New Moon Observation
First New Moon after the Fall Equinox
Weather cold, but not unseasonable*

Tonight I celebrate the 25th anniversary of my birth and the 5th anniversary of my appointment to serve as Chief Observer here in the capital of this northernmost province of Parthia. This is a special mark of favor for me since the court astrologers are all Zoroastrians, while I am a God-fearer—a Gentile follower of the Jewish faith. The astrologers prefer interpreting signs in warmth and comfort and daylight, so leave the long night watches to me.

With me tonight, as he is every New Moon night, is Balthasar, a venerable Jewish scholar of some seventy years, and his lone granddaughter, Esther.

Because of my personal studies, I will list the names of the wandering stars in both their common form and as they are known to the Jews.

Mercury, called in Hebrew The Messenger, remained visible for almost an hour after sunset.

It is unusual for Mercury to stay aloft for so long. Balthasar says this is significant—a portent of a message about to be delivered.

The thinnest sliver of the New Moon, which is referred to as The Holy, descended behind Mount Alvand in the west some three-quarters of an hour later.

By this time the southwest was aglow with the flame of The Milky Way.

Jupiter, The Righteous, was already well placed for viewing, being almost due south in the constellation of The Water Bearer. Balthasar commented that this was a reminder of baptism, the righteous Jewish practice of religious bathing, but did not elaborate further.

Saturn, called by the Jews The Sabbath, was southeast, in the sign of The Fish. Since ancient times The Fish has represented the nation of Israel. Balthasar says it means there is great longing in the hearts of the Jews for their Sabbath rest—the true rest that can only come with the advent of Messiah. He says nowhere is this more true than in the homeland of the Jews, anguished by the long reign of Herod the Idumean, puppet of Rome. (This I believe Balthasar got from caravan news and not from reading the sky!)

I studied the revolving wheel of night for the rest of the dark hours, till Sirius rose in the east, heralding the dawn. Balthasar noted that its Hebrew name is The Guardian, or in its compound form, Naz-Zer, as in the ones who take the Nazarite vow of separation.

Nothing further suggesting itself and sleep overtaking us, we descended the seven levels of the city to our homes in the White Ring and so to bed.

Will cast up my accounts after some hours' rest.

And Peniel wrote:

It all begins with a Jewish priest, Zachariah, who lived when Herod was king of Judea. Zachariah was a member of the priestly order of Abijah. His wife, Elisheba, was from the priestly line of Aaron. Zachariah and Elisheba were righteous in God's eyes, careful to obey all of the Lord's commandments and regulations. They had no children because Elisheba was barren, and they were both very old. One day Zachariah was serving God in the Temple, for his order was on duty that week.