

HEROD

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Based on a true story

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The dominions of Herod were too little
for the greatness of his soul.

-- Augustus Caesar

FADE IN:

EXT. MOUNT ARBEL - THE GALILEE - NIGHT

We rise up the face of a cliff... passing cave openings lit by a faint and flickering glow within...

SUPER: 45 B.C. -- The Galilee

Sounds of CHOPPING and HAMMERING become louder...

EXT. THE CLIFF TOP - NIGHT

A sudden blaze of torchlight reveals dozens of dirty, bearded, sweating men, stripped to their loincloths.

A huge rough-hewn box hangs by chains from a tree trunk that extends over the edge of the cliff. The chains pass through pulleys and are wrapped around a massive wooden wheel --

It's a primitive elevator.

HEROD (about 27) surveys the scene with a critical eye as he straps his armor over his filthy tunic.

Three of his men -- NATHAN (early 20s) and two archers -- also arm themselves. Nathan has an unusual weapon -- a scythe lashed to the end of a spear.

Herod goes to inspect the ropes controlling the wheel, and is joined by his brother JOSEPH (18).

JOSEPH

(re: the box)

I wish you'd let me go with you.

HEROD

I need you up here. And mother would never forgive me if I brought you home dead.

JOSEPH

And what if I bring YOU home dead?

HEROD

Then they'll make YOU governor of the Galilee -- and you can deal with the damn rebels.

He smiles, reassuringly, then climbs up onto the tree trunk.

Joseph hands him up a torch. Holding it in one hand, Herod walks along the tree trunk past the edge of the cliff.

He glances down into the black void... and gets dizzy. He struggles to keep his balance... almost falls... then recovers and swings down into the box hanging below.

Joseph, watching from the cliff top, lets out his breath and helps Nathan up onto the tree trunk.

INT. THE BOX - NIGHT

Herod and his men brace themselves.

HEROD
Let it down!

EXT. THE CLIFF TOP - NIGHT

Joseph and the men struggle to control the descent of the box; chains RATTLE and timbers CREAK.

INT. THE BOX - NIGHT

Herod peers out through an arrow slit.

HEROD
Stop!

The box jerks to a halt before the glowing mouth of a cave.

HEROD (CONT'D)
(calling to cave)
By order of the king, surrender the
rebel Antigonus!

The light from the cave snuffs out.

FWIIIIIIK!

A dagger impales itself in the wood an inch from Herod's eye. He spots a rebel squatting in the shadows by the cave mouth.

HEROD (CONT'D)
Use the hook.

Nathan thrusts the spear-scythe through a window slit.

The rebel parries the hook with his spear, but Nathan grabs him around the waist and jerks him, screaming, off the ledge.

INT. THE CAVE - NIGHT

The REBEL LEADER crouches in the inner recesses of the cave, the torchlight from the box reflecting in his eyes.

INT. THE BOX - NIGHT

Herod peers into the dark cave.

HEROD

Cover me.

The archers move to the arrow slits and draw their bows.

Herod climbs to the top of the swaying box, looks down into the blackness, then launches himself toward the cave mouth.

INT. THE CAVE - NIGHT

Herod lands precariously, almost falling from the cave mouth, then steadies himself and draws his sword.

HEROD

Throw out your weapons!

He waits. No response.

HEROD (CONT'D)

(to his men)

Fire-arrows!

He flattens himself against the cave wall.

Two fire-arrows streak by. One sets a basket ablaze.

Squinting in the sudden burst of light, Herod's startled to see:

A WOMAN holding her hand over the mouth of her DAUGHTER (10) as her SON (5) cowers at her side.

The Rebel Leader guards them, brandishing a long knife.

HEROD (CONT'D)

(to his men)

Hold!

He indicates a rope ladder coiled at the cave mouth.

HEROD (CONT'D)

(to Rebel Leader)

They can go.

The woman looks imploringly at her husband.

HEROD (CONT'D)

(to his men)

Let the woman and children pass!

The woman looks anxiously from Herod to her husband.

REBEL LEADER

NO!

He throws a fistful of dirt at Herod's eyes. Herod wipes his face, blinking, as the rebel lunges at him with the knife.

Herod fends him off and they angle for position.

The rebel grabs the boy and uses him as a shield.

The woman gasps.

Herod hesitates, looking at the boy.

Nathan and an archer land at the cave entrance. The archer fits an arrow to his bow.

The rebel raises his knife to his son's throat.

REBEL LEADER (CONT'D)

My son will not die a slave.

WOMAN

No!

She screams as the boy falls dead, then drops to cradle his bleeding body as her daughter clings to her skirts.

HEROD

Shoot him.

The rebel jerks the woman to her feet.

THWAP.

The arrow meant for him hits her instead. She crumples to the ground. The archer looks at Herod, aghast.

DAUGHTER

Eema!

The rebel grabs a clay oil lamp and flings it at the archer. It smashes against his breastplate, spreading oil over his tunic and dripping down his legs.

The rebel kicks the burning basket at him.

The archer goes up in flames. As his hair CRACKLES and burns, he screams and staggers out of the cave.

The scream ends with a THUD and a RATTLE of stones.

The oil on the floor ignites. Herod and Nathan hug the cave walls to stay clear of the fire.

Across the flames, the rebel holds the terrified girl.

HEROD

Let her go!

REBEL LEADER

So you can make her your whore?

He hurls himself out of the cave, holding his daughter.

REBEL LEADER (O.S.) (CONT'D)

Shemaaaaa --!

A THUD cuts short his cry.

Herod and Nathan are unnerved, breathing hard.

WAAAAAAA! A baby cries out from the back of the cave.

The men exchange looks -- now what?

EXT. THE GALILEE - NIGHT

ANTIGONUS and his sister ROXANA, on horseback, watch the cliff battle from afar. They're an aristocratic pair in their early 30's. She's dressed like a man, and their cloaks are fastened with gold brooches decorated with menorahs.

ROXANA

We could have stayed, to help them.

ANTIGONUS

Why die, when others will do it for you?

Roxana looks at him, disapproving. He turns his horse away from the cliff.

ANTIGONUS (CONT'D)

To the east!

He spurs his horse to a gallop, kicking up dirt.

EXT. THE CLIFF BOTTOM - DAY

A shovel flings dirt into the air

Herod, Joseph, and the men dig graves. Their fallen comrades lie alongside dozens of dead rebels.

There's a baby in a basket. Nathan milks a goat and dips a cloth into the milk, then gives it to the baby to suck.

The men look up as they hear HORSES approach.

A TRIBUNE comes into view, leading a company of Roman soldiers. One carries a tall standard topped with a Roman eagle and the inscription "SPQR."

Herod stares at the eagle, gilded and imperious, then at the Romans' gleaming armor and scarlet cloaks. Self-consciously, he wipes his hands on his dirty tunic.

A Judean SENTRY steps out to block the Romans' path.

SENTRY
Who goes there?

This amuses SEXTUS CAESAR (early 40s).

SEXTUS
I'm Sextus Caesar, young man --
governor of the Roman province of
Syria.

He gestures at BASSUS (40s), the stumpy officer riding at his side, who eyes the scruffy Judean soldiers with distaste.

SEXTUS (CONT'D)
And this is my lieutenant, Quintus
Caecilius Bassus. And you are --?

HEROD
Let them pass.

The sentry steps aside. Sextus rides up to Herod.

SEXTUS
You must be Herod.

He looks at Joseph and notes the family resemblance.

SEXTUS (CONT'D)
Your brother?

HEROD
Joseph.

SEXTUS
I see your father in you both. I
trust the governor of Judea is
well?

HEROD
We left him in health.

Sextus looks at the row of bodies.

SEXTUS
It would be far less work to burn
them. Or leave them to feed the
jackals.

HEROD
That is not our custom in Judea.

Sextus scoffs.

SEXTUS

In Rome, we'd nail them to crosses
and line the roads with 'em. Set
an example. Did you find Antigonus?

HEROD

Our scouts are still out looking.

Bassus notices the baby in the basket.

BASSUS

Looks like you missed one.

He gets down from his horse and draws his sword.

HEROD AND NATHAN

NO!

Bassus stops, and looks at Sextus in disgust.

SEXTUS

You really must learn to harden
your hearts.

He peers up the cliff face.

SEXTUS (CONT'D)

How did you reach the caves?

Herod points straight up. Sextus cranes his neck to see the
box dangling above.

SEXTUS (CONT'D)

Impressive. A Roman engineer could
not have done better.

SOLDIER (O.S.)

(from the cliff top)

Ready to drop?

Joseph clears the men away from the drop zone.

JOSEPH

Ready!

With a RATTLE of chains, the box hurtles to earth and SMASHES
to splinters.

SEXTUS

A wise precaution. Never leave
your tools for your enemies to use
against you.

Herod helps him back onto his horse. Sextus smiles down at
him, beneficently.

SEXTUS (CONT'D)

Judea's too small for a man of your talents. You should come see me in Damascus.

The Romans ride away.

Herod watches until the golden eagle disappears.

LATER

The Judean soldiers lay the bodies in the graves.

The scouting party returns. A SCOUT herds an OLD WOMAN carrying a basket.

SCOUT

We lost his trail. But we found her hiding in the bushes.

Joseph looks in her basket and pulls out an apple. She snatches it away as the men chuckle.

The baby cries, and the old woman goes to pick him up.

OLD WOMAN

Where are the others?

Herod looks over at the graves. The old woman hurries toward them, then drops to her knees as she sees the bodies. Nathan tries to comfort her, but she pushes him away.

OLD WOMAN (CONT'D)

(to Herod)

Do your gods demand the blood of children, Edomite? Or do your Roman masters?

HEROD

Their deaths were not my doing.

The old woman gestures at the other bodies.

OLD WOMAN

And these?

HEROD

They would not yield.

OLD WOMAN

They would not kneel -- not to you, and not to Rome.

She struggles to her feet, refusing Nathan's help.

OLD WOMAN (CONT'D)

I will not kneel to you, nor will
my grandson.

She shows Herod the baby.

OLD WOMAN (CONT'D)

This is Judah, son of Ezekias. I
will teach him to curse the name of
Herod, son of Antipater.

She raises her claw-like hand.

OLD WOMAN (CONT'D)

May God and the angels avenge this
innocent blood. May your name be
reviled throughout the generations.
May worms eat your flesh while you
yet live. And may your path be
strewn with the bones of those you
love.

She spits to seal the curse.

The soldiers recoil and make the sign against the evil eye.

Herod just stands there, unmoved.

HEROD

Take her back where you found her.

EXT. SEPPHORIS - EVENING

The city's on a hill overlooking the Via Maris. Goats graze
in the terraced fields of grape vines and olive trees.

SUPER: Sepphoris, Capital of the Galilee

Tired and dirty, Herod and his men ride through the streets
as shopkeepers put away their wares.

A harlot lifts her veil and blows Herod a kiss. He smiles
back at her.

A second harlot gives Joseph a come-hither look and shows him
a little leg. He blushes and looks away.

But others are not so friendly. Some of the shopkeepers
glare at Herod as they SLAM their shutters closed.

Someone dumps a chamber-pot from an upstairs window, and the
contents SPLASH to the cobblestones in front of Herod's
horse, making it shy away.

Nathan puts his hand to his sword hilt and looks at Herod,
but Herod shakes his head.

INT. BATH HOUSE - NIGHT

The walls are of cracked stucco painted to look like marble; the floor is a crude geometric tile mosaic.

SUSANNAH (early 20s), Herod's housekeeper, takes a steaming pitcher from a servant girl and pours water into a stone tub.

Herod leans back in the bath, sipping wine from a goblet.

SUSANNAH
More wine, master?

HEROD
No...

He indicates that she should send the serving girl away. She dismisses the girl with a wave, and she bows and leaves.

HEROD (CONT'D)
But you could get in here with me.

Susannah smiles and goes to latch the door. She unties her belt and slips off her dress, then climbs into the bath. The water splashes out of the tub as she straddles him.

EXT. THE PALACE IN JERUSALEM - DAY

Water splashes from a fountain in a pool in a garden enclosed by an arcaded walkway.

PRINCESS ALEXANDRA, late 30's, dictates to a female scribe.

PRINCESS MARIAMNE, her daughter, 18, plays with Sekhmet, a kitten.

Mariamne's brother, PRINCE ARISTOBULOUS, 10, drops bread crumbs to the fish in the pool. He's exceptionally good-looking, but acts younger than his age.

RACHEL, 60s, a servant, sits near Aristobulous, mending.

ANTIPATER, late 50s, bears the scars of twenty years of war. He processes a basket of scrolls with the help of a team of scribes, and he wears a ring set with a golden eagle.

KING HYRCANUS, 60's, is a mild and melancholy man wearing a golden diadem. He stares at the fountain as he sips his wine, lost in thought.

The king's weasely CUPBEARER approaches with a jug of wine.

CUPBEARER
My lord king....

Hyrcanus raises his goblet to be refilled.