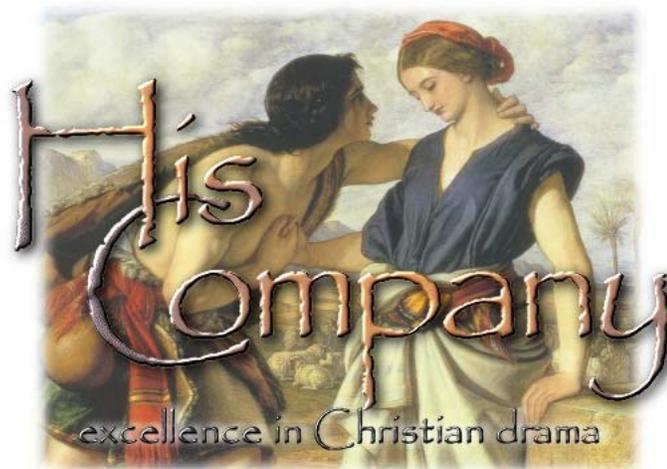


THE ESSENCE OF HIS DEATH

A THREE-ACT PLAY
FOR EASTER

by
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The Essence of His Death

ACT ONE

Scene One

Time: Thursday afternoon, c. AD30.

Place: A road between Jerusalem and the Egyptian Delta

Props: 3 large shoulder bags (at least)

Collection of stone and glass jars with stoppers

2 leather pouches for coins

Coins (washers work well)

2 large handfuls of gaudy costume jewelry

Water bag (empty), broken crust of bread, large fish

HORDEDEF and SEKHTI have come up into Judea, through Bethlehem to Jerusalem, for the Passover. They know there will be many people in the city for the holiday—and they are there to separate some of them from their money. However, they know it will not be easy pickings; the Jews, under Roman domination—and Roman taxes—haven't an abundance of money to spend on perfumes and unguents.

The two have a small plot of land in the Egyptian delta where they grow their flowers and produce the essence which is then made into perfume. They travel in an ever-expanding radius to market their wares, for they have not always been the most forthright in their dealings.

Hordedef and Sekhti are dressed in the simple white, linear attire of the Egyptian peasant. In their bags they carry a fragrant assortment of their product: flower petals, oils and unguents pressed from the blooms, and a small amount of spices for which they have traded on their journey north.

Hordedef is the leader of the two by default. He makes the necessary decisions because Sekhti will not. He is opinionated and—on occasion—abrasive to those in their company. Sekhti, in contrast, is quieter, and more respectful of others.

Enter HORDEDEF [Hor-duh-def] and SEKHTI [Seck-tee]. HORDEDEF enters at a brisk pace, stops, turns, and addresses his partner who is still off-stage.

HORDEDEF

(impatiently)

Come along, Sekhti! Must you dawdle so!

SEKHTI

(entering reluctantly)

Have you ever seen that flower before? It was beautiful!

HORDEDEF

We haven't time to stop for every strange flower you trip over. It's only two days till the Passover. We must get to Jerusalem before the feast.

SEKHTI

You worry so.

HORDEDEF

One of us has to.

SEKHTI

Our stock is the finest this season. We'll sell it all the first day—and return to Egypt with our bags filled with gold.

HORDEDEF

If our bags aren't filled with gold, my wife will have me sleeping in the street.

SEKHTI

Ah, Nefer-ma — that sweet-smelling rose.

HORDEDEF

(grimacing; aside)

My sweet-smelling rose lost her fragrance years ago.

SEKHTI

Just the mention of her name and I can smell her—

HORDEDEF

Watch it!

SEKHTI

—cooking. *(wait for audience reaction)* I'm hungry.

HORDEDEF

Well, what have we got?

SEKHTI

(digging through his bag, as he joins HORDEDEF)

Running low. I'm glad we are close to Jerusalem. (pulling the food out) I can offer you a — (*sniffing*) slightly stale crust of bread or — (*holding it at arm's length*) this ripe fish.

HORDEDEF

(*disgustedly*)

Some choice.

SEKHTI

(*dead-pan*)

Please. The fish is waiting.

HORDEDEF

The bread will do. (*taking the bread from Sekhti*) And what am I to wash this down with?

Sekhti opens their waterbag, peers inside, then blows into it; dust blows back into his face. He looks at Hordedef apologetically.

HORDEDEF

You do a great job of planning a trip, Sekhti. Any suggestions?

SEKHTI

(*sheepishly*)

There was a stream about half-a-day back . . .

HORDEDEF

(*ruefully, staring at his crust of bread*)

I hear the wine in Jerusalem is excellent this year.

Enter THEODOSIUS [Theo-doe-see-us], a Roman merchant on his way toward Egypt. He is a trader in silly and inconsequential trinkets, a commodity ill-befitting his 'robust' stature. Theodosius sweats a lot.

THEODOSIUS

People! What a sight for tired, old eyes! Real people! Do you realize how far I've come with nothing but snakes and scorpions for company?!

HORDEDEF

(*stopping him*)

We're from Egypt. We know all about such things.

THEODOSIUS

From Egypt! That's where I'm headed! *(expansively)* The name's Theodosius. And you?

HORDEDEF

(suspiciously)

You look Roman.

THEODOSIUS

(jovially)

With good reason! *(slapping Hordedef across the back)* Roman by birth. I've been selling my wares down through Syria, Samaria, Judea . . . *(opening his bag)* And I can see right off that you two are men of quality . . . who appreciate the finer things in life.

HORDEDEF

(stiffly, as SEKHTI rummages through his bag for a sample)

We, too, are merchants.

SEKHTI

(offering a sample to Theodosius)

The river Nile brings its live-giving silt and leaves it on our land—where we grow beautiful flowers which we turn into the sweet-smelling essence before you now. A fragile and exquisite blossom is crushed to extract the oils that—

THEODOSIUS

(sniffing the essence)

An enticing aroma.

SEKHTI

(innocently)

Why, thank you.

Hordedef rolls his eyes toward heaven at the incredible naivete' of his partner.

THEODOSIUS

(taking Sekhti by the shoulder, as he returns the sample)

Ah, but my friend . . . *(romantically)* Have you ever peered deeply into the burning fires of a woman's eyes? Have you ever seen the light of a silver moon dancing over the trembling waves of the sea?

Sekhti is quickly being sucked into Theodosius' sales pitch; Hordedef, on the other hand, is growing impatient with the Roman's slick pitch.

THEODOSIUS

(continuing)

Have you ever . . . *(having successfully hooked Sekhti)* well, I see, my friend, that you are a man of the world. I need say no more.

HORDEDEF

(aside; muttering)

That would be refreshing.

THEODOSIUS

(opening his bag)

You will not find more exquisite jewelry anywhere — why, not even in Corinth!

Theodosius pulls out a handful of gaudy, costume jewelry—gold chains, silver, large fake stones. Sekhti's eyes light up as he selects something; he then takes it to HORDEDEF.

SEKHTI

Ohhh . . . aren't they beautiful, Hordedef? Wouldn't Isis love to have something—

HORDEDEF

(pulling him aside; in a loud, stage-whisper)

Trinkets, Sekhti! Worthless trinkets! We could buy his entire stock with just one vial of our perfume.

SEKHTI

So I'll pay what it's worth!

HORDEDEF

I don't do business with Romans.

SEKHTI

(becoming irritated)

Nobody's asking you to. I just want to buy something pretty for my girlfriend. *(He returns to an eager Theodosius to complete the transaction)*

HORDEDEF

(to Theodosius; disdainfully)

Romans! You think you own the whole world!

THEODOSIUS

(after a beat; 'well, of course')

We do.

HORDEDEF

(to Sekhti)

You see? Don't you just love 'em! They come in and take over your land, tax you to death, corrupt your heritage . . .

THEODOSIUS

(firmly)

I don't get into politics. I'm a simple merchant. I respect your heritage. Egypt was already ancient before Rome was even heard of. Your people have always treated me well—and I them.

HORDEDEF

Still a Roman.

THEODOSIUS

And proudly. But all I ask is a fair deal. Why, I'm on my way now to trade for some of your fine Egyptian linen. There's none better in the world.

HORDEDEF

(incredulous)

And you think my people will trade linen for your worthless baubles?

THEODOSIUS

(laughing)

No, no. I'm selling them along the way, and with the money I'll buy the linen. Why it's easy finding suckers to . . . *(SEKHTI, behind THEODOSIUS,*

reacts with surprise and shock at the insult) . . . ugh, well now, that is . . .
(*realizing he has just blown his sale*) Oh my.

SEKHTI

(disappointed; returning the trinkets to Theodosius; to Hordedef)

And he seemed like such a nice man.

HORDEDEF

(looking at Theodosius, but speaking to Sekhti)

Come along, Sekhti. Get our things. (*to Theodosius, sarcastically*) You will excuse us. We're in a hurry to get to Jerusalem.

THEODOSIUS

Jerusalem! (*thinking*) Well then, let me redeem myself by giving you a warning. (*He sits down, as if preparing to tell them something of great import*)
When I left Jerusalem the place was buzzing.

HORDEDEF and SEKHTI are very interested.

THEODOSIUS

(continuing)

You know the Jews; word travels like lightning. And now the whole city's involved.

SEKHTI

(impatiently)

Well, what is it?

THEODOSIUS

There's a man there—sort of a . . . special man—a prophet or teacher of sorts. I don't know all the details. I've never understood the Jews and this seems to be a Jewish thing. (*leaning forward*) But here's the really strange part: The Jewish leaders—now as I understand it—have enlisted the aid of the Romans in ridding themselves of this man. (*leaning back*) Figure that out. This guy must be some criminal!

HORDEDEF

What does this have to do with us?

THEODOSIUS

Nothing. Except that you're walking into a real mess. The whole town's agitated—out of control! And let me tell you, friends, *(shaking his pouch of meager earnings)* they are far too busy with this scandal to consider buying a poor merchant's goods.

SEKHTI

(a little snooty)

I would think that would depend on the goods being offered.

THEODOSIUS

Okay, okay. Think of me what you wish. Just remember what I've said when you get there.

HORDEDEF

We've been to Jerusalem before. We know our way around.

THEODOSIUS

(seriously)

This is different. It's not like before. *(preparing to leave)* If you're smart, you'll go around the city. Or better yet, go back to Egypt. *(brightening)* Say, you could accompany me to your fair land! How about it? Three traveling together can keep the thieves away!

HORDEDEF

(to Theodosius)

No, thank you. *(to Sekhti as they quickly exit, leaving the Roman standing alone)* The way I see it, Sekhti, with him along we would be traveling with the thieves.

THEODOSIUS exits chuckling to himself.

Scene Two

Time: Thursday evening

Place: An anteroom of the Sanhedrin's council chamber

Enter MALCHIAH [Mal-keye'-uh] and NICODEMUS, members of the Sanhedrin. Occasionally voices can be heard from backstage, outbursts coming from the heated exchange in the council chambers (optional).

MALCHIAH

You're a fool, Nicodemus! How much longer do you think you can keep this up?

NICODEMUS

Will you now give me away?

MALCHIAH

(exasperated)

No, I'll not give you away. You're still my friend. But I should turn you in. If you persist in this you'll bring us all down with you.

NICODEMUS

You didn't vote with me.

MALCHIAH

I am implicated by your confidence in me. I take a chance by simply leaving the council chamber with you.

NICODEMUS

Then why can't you vote with me? Why can't you see it, Malchiah?

MALCHIAH

I would ask you the same, my misguided friend.

NICODEMUS

You were even with me that day he spoke.

MALCHIAH

There have been many days he has spoken. Too many.

NICODEMUS

Yes, he's given us every opportunity to understand, and still some refuse . . .

MALCHIAH

There's no need to get personal!

NICODEMUS

But that's precisely what Jesus has been telling us! Malchiah, are you just like the rest? We keep going to him, we learned men of the Sanhedrin, trying to . . . debate Jesus into submission.

MALCHIAH

(insistently)

This man is a disruption!

NICODEMUS

And what is he disrupting?

MALCHIAH

Well, our way of life, the way we do things here, . . . our tradition.

NICODEMUS

(he had been waiting for that word)

Yes, our tradition. And I thank God he is disrupting our tradition.

There is a surge of voices from offstage during NICODEMUS's last line and MALCHIAH nervously tries to silence NICODEMUS.

MALCHIAH

Don't press your luck, Nicodemus.

NICODEMUS

(slightly subdued; acknowledging his rash behavior)

It was quite some time ago. A group of us had sought Jesus out to once again argue trivialities. A report had come to the council that the disciples of Jesus had been observed eating without having washed their hands.

MALCHIAH

(smugly)

Now I remember. He refused the challenge, as I recall.

NICODEMUS

Jesus refused to join in our petty bickering.

MALCHIAH

‘Petty bickering’? It’s the Law!

NICODEMUS

Your memory fails you, Malchiah—as does your scholarship.

MALCHIAH is greatly offended.

NICODEMUS

We didn’t challenge him on the law. We asked Jesus why his disciples transgress the tradition of the elders.

MALCHIAH

(not seeing the difference)

Yes . . .

NICODEMUS

(incredulous; sadly)

Well, I see you are still one of them.

MALCHIAH

(alarmed)

One of ‘them’? Nicodemus, *(gesturing toward backstage)* you are one of them!

NICODEMUS

(with a touch of melancholy)

Not anymore. Not since that day.

MALCHIAH

(taking NICODEMUS firmly by the shoulders)

Don't take this any further. You are a respected councillor, a member of the Sanhedrin. Don't jeopardize your standing for the ravings of a lunatic prophet—an accused blasphemer.

NICODEMUS

(pulling away)

I'm told there is an animal down in Ethiopia that has a habit of hiding its head in the sand when challenged by an adversary. *(pause)* When I heard Jesus that day, I heard the truth—as if for the first time. Don't you feel the hunger, Malchiah? Don't you hunger for the truth?

MALCHIAH

(stiffly)

I know the truth.

NICODEMUS

Do you think Jesus serves a God other than ours?

MALCHIAH

Don't quiz me on the twisted contents of his mind! My faith has been tested by time and was given by the very hand of God.

NICODEMUS

But it's those commandments God handed down to us that have become twisted. We have designed for ourselves such a maze of regulations that we've lost sight of who God really is! All Jesus has done is cut through the confusion to show us that our relationship with God must be personal. It cannot be founded on regulations.

MALCHIAH

(indignantly)

He called us hypocrites!

NICODEMUS

And he backed it up by quoting Isaiah: "This people honors me with their lips, but their heart is far away from me. In vain do they worship me, teaching as doctrines the precepts of men." Tradition, Malchiah. Just empty, selfish tradition.

MALCHIAH

Don't quote the scriptures to me!

NICODEMUS

(snapping back)

Why not? You seem to have forgotten them!

MALCHIAH

All right! Go follow your miniature God. I'll not stand in your way—and I'll not expose you to the rest of the council. *(with bitterness)* But I'll not vote with you. *(pause)* And I'll not be your friend.

MALCHIAH exits in a huff. NICODEMUS stares after him, his anger diminishing into a sadness for his friend. With a heavy sigh, he follows, returning to the council chambers for the next vote against Jesus.

Scene Three

Time: Just before dawn, Friday

Place: The courtyard of the High Priest's (Caiaphas) palace

Props: Charcoal fire, DownStage Center

Stick for tending fire

Swords for soldiers

Same props used by Egyptians in Scene One

As the lights come up, the servant girl, JERUSHA, is DSC tending the fire. Enter CRASSIUS, LUCIUS, HORDEDEF, and SEKHTI. The two soldiers are trying (with little success) to shake off SEKHTI and HORDEDEF, who are enthusiastically trailing after them, trying to peddle their wares.

SEKHTI

(persistently)

. . . brings its life-giving silt and leaves it on our land—where we grow beautiful flowers which we turn into the sweet-smelling essence before you now. A fragile and exquisite blossom is crushed to—

CRASSIUS

(turning quickly to take SEKHTI by his tunic)

I'm about to crush you, you little lotus flower! *(sniffing at SEKHTI)* Phew! Have you been eating fish?

The other officer, encouraged by his partner, grabs HORDEDEF by the scruff of the neck and hauls him over next to SEKHTI.

HORDEDEF

But sir, the great and mighty Roman Empire was built on the concept of free commerce! Surely you would not restrict our trade . . .

LUCIUS

Hold it down! Don't you know where you are?

HORDEDEF

(looking around)

Why, no.

CRASSIUS

You're standing in the private courtyard of the High Priest Caiaphas. And if he gets upset because there's too much noise outside, he tells the centurion. Then the centurion lands on us for not keeping things quiet for the High Priest!

LUCIUS

And do you know what happens then?

HORDEDEF and SEKHTI shake their heads slowly in unison.

CRASSIUS

(fiercely)

We land on you for making us look bad! Now, keep it down and leave us alone!

HORDEDEF and SEKHTI sheepishly slink back as the two officers join the servant girl at the charcoal fire. HORDEDEF and SEKHTI stay near the fire, just behind the others.

LUCIUS

(to JERUSHA)

What's going on up there, anyway?

JERUSHA

They have to question him.

LUCIUS

Why? What's he done?

CRASSIUS

Who is this guy?

JERUSHA

(as she tends the fire; cynically)

A teacher. A prophet. A trouble-maker.

CRASSIUS

Wait a minute. I heard their talk. Those offenses wouldn't call for what they're planning for this man.

JERUSHA

You don't know; you're not a Jew.

CRASSIUS

(to his companion; with a derisive laugh)

And I thank Jupiter for that!

JERUSHA

He claims to be the Son of Man.

The two soldiers just look at her, not knowing the term.

JERUSHA

(impatiently)

The Son of God.

LUCIUS

Well, okay. *(gesturing to his head)* So he's not quite all there. That's still not cause to crucify him.

JERUSHA

(startled by the word "crucify")

Is that what they're plotting?

CRASSIUS

Why do you think we're here?

LUCIUS

Even the Sanhedrin can't crucify a man.

There is a knocking at one of the entrances.

JERUSHA

(getting up to see who it is)

I didn't know they were taking it that far.

HORDEDEF

(stepping closer to the soldiers)

Gentlemen, this is a most unfortunate time for all. Political intrigue is always messy. But while you're waiting, perhaps I could show you a few of—

CRASSIUS

(with a menacing growl)

Are you still here?!

HORDEDEF and SEKHTI once again back away, silently, as attention is focused on JERUSHA at the door.

JERUSHA

(speaking to PETER, who remains hidden offstage)

You're one of them. *(intently)* You're one of his disciples.

PETER

(pushing his way in past her; showing labored bravado)

I don't know what you're talking about! I just got into town tonight.

JERUSHA

Then why are you here? This is the home of Caiaphas, the Chief Priest.
(trying to send him away)

PETER

(stepping towards the fire)

I saw your fire through the gate. *(nervously acknowledging the two soldiers)*
Just thought you might let a traveler warm himself for a moment.

LUCIUS

(suspiciously)

Sure. Why not.

JERUSHA

My master wouldn't like this.

CRASSIUS

Aw, what's the harm. It's a cold night.

SEKHTI

(to PETER; friendly)

We just got in, too. My name's Sekhti. My partner is Hordedef. *(waiting for Peter to give his name)*

PETER

(with some disdain)

Egyptians.

HORDEDEF

Why, yes. And you are?

PETER

(trying to get them to leave him alone)

Tired from my journey. *(sitting down next to the fire)*

CRASSIUS

(to PETER)

You're from Galilee.

PETER

(nervously)

Yes.

CRASSIUS

Maybe you know this guy inside—the “prophet”. He's from that area.

LUCIUS

Doesn't look good for him.

CRASSIUS

(to LUCIUS)

I still can't figure them wanting to crucify him. Yeah, the guy's a pain in the neck, but why—

JERUSHA

(subdued; almost sadly)

To us Jews, God is everything. From the time we are born until we die . . . every part of our life centers around Jehovah. He personally gave us the laws we live by—laws that govern every aspect of living—not just our worship. This . . . man has broken the most important law we have. He claims to be that God we worship. The council won't have it. They don't just want him punished. They want him dead. *(SHE EXITS)*

HORDEDEF

In Egypt, we have many gods—more gods than can be counted. But with the many we already have, there’s always room for one more.

LUCIUS

Same with us. *(sarcastically)* We Romans think of our gods as a . . . community.

CRASSIUS

(to all)

But not the Jews. They got it into their heads that in all the heavens there’s room for only one god.

SEKHTI

It’s a curious god who wishes people to be so easily put to death.

PETER

(looking down; too quietly for the others to hear)

It’s not God doing it.

CRASSIUS

What did you say?

PETER

(showing some anger)

I said, it’s not God doing it. It’s Caiaphas.

LUCIUS

(studying PETER)

You speak like one of them. *(taking a closer look)* He is one of them, Crassius.

PETER

(flaring)

I told you before! I’m not!

CRASSIUS

But you do know what we’re talking about, don’t you.

PETER

The word has traveled. And, like you said, I am from Galilee.

From this point on, CRASSIUS spends most of his time studying PETER.

SEKHTI

Well, whoever this man is, he sure has made a lot of enemies!

CRASSIUS

(looking at PETER)

Oh, he has his followers, too.

PETER looks nervously away.

LUCIUS

(now studying PETER)

But the smart ones have made themselves scarce.

CRASSIUS

(edging closer to Peter)

I would think this Jesus would have arranged for at least one of his followers to stay close by. Do you think so, Lucius?

LUCIUS

Makes sense to me.

PETER gets up and begins moving away.

CRASSIUS

(with intimidation)

I also think that if we came across such a person it would be our duty to hold him for Caiaphas.

LUCIUS

(in a threatening tone)

I think you're right, Crassius.

PETER

(running away, fearfully; shouting)

I do not know this man! *(he exits)*

CRASSIUS and LUCIUS begin to exit after PETER, in half-hearted pursuit, but are stopped by JERUSHA, who enters just as PETER exits. She is shaken by what she has witnessed inside the palace.

JERUSHA

(to the soldiers)

Hold it! You're supposed to take the prisoner.

CRASSIUS

Now what?

LUCIUS

Why don't they make up their minds!

JERUSHA

They want you to take him to the Governor.

CRASSIUS

Pilate will have our heads for bothering him with this.

LUCIUS

Just blame it on Caiaphas. *(turning to leave, but stopping to speak to the Egyptians)* You trouble-makers better be on your way out of town.

LUCIUS and CRASSIUS exit.

JERUSHA

(backing away; troubled)

These are very strange timesvery strange. *(to HORDEDEF and SEKHTI)* Go home. You don't belong here in the middle of all this.

JERUSHA exits opposite the soldiers.

HORDEDEF

Who is this guy?

SEKHTI

Someone this town won't soon forget!

HORDEDEF

One man? One man is doing all this?

SEKHTI

One man seems to be enough. *(after a pause)* Hordedef, I'm beginning to really miss Egypt.

HORDEDEF

You always get homesick.

SEKHTI

We should never have come. It's dangerous here.

HORDEDEF

No. Dangerous is if we go back empty-handed. *(reassuringly)* C'mon. Just keep your eyes open for members of the Sanhedrin.

SEKHTI

How would I know someone of the Sanhedrin?

HORDEDEF

(as they exit)

Oh, that's easy. He'll be the one with his nose in the air.

They exit.

Scene Four

Time: Early Friday morning, after dawn

Place: A spring just outside one of the gates of Jerusalem

Props: Waterjugs for women at spring

Same props for Egyptians from Scene One

Miscellaneous props for extras

Enter ABIGAIL, RAHAB [Ray-hab], and DINAH and a crowd of people (optional) as the lights come up. The three local women are here to collect their water and exchange the usual gossip. The crowd mills about in small groups. Those closest react to the dialogue.

The eldest of the three women at the Jerusalem spring, ABIGAIL is a street-wise, crafty, yet compassionate woman of around thirty-five years. She doesn't like to show it often, but beneath her crusty exterior there lies an intelligent humanity. She would much rather play the cynic, along with her friend Rahab, but can just as easily empathize with the tenderness of her other friend, Dinah. Abigail is a strong woman and opinionated—-not afraid to stand for the unpopular cause if she truly believes.

RAHAB borders on evil. She pulls no punches and has little concern for others. There is something sour and fermenting deep within her. She hates Jesus and what he stands for, and has no patience with Dinah's adoration of him.

DINAH is a fresh, young flower. In her is the innocence of youth and the beauty of a new day.

ABIGAIL

And then she told me that her son had taken the Moabite woman as a wife . . . and the entire town was upset about it. Just the entire town!

RAHAB

And they say he's not a bit ashamed! Can you imagine?

ABIGAIL

No, I cannot! The nerve!

DINAH

Girls! How can you fuss over such gossip with all that's going on?

ABIGAIL

(to a confused Rahab)

The Galilean.

RAHAB

Oh that. Dinah, do yourself a favor and just forget about him.

DINAH

(firmly)

I can't forget about him.

ABIGAIL

(putting her arm around the younger woman)

Honey, just think about it. If he really is everything he claims to be, would this be happening to him?

RAHAB

And can the council be wrong? He went before Caiaphas! The High Priest couldn't be so wrong about a man.

ABIGAIL

Now really, Dinah, don't you think they know best.

DINAH

But what has he done?

RAHAB

Well for starters, he called himself the Son of God!

ABIGAIL

(aghast)

No!

RAHAB

He did. Clear blasphemy.

DINAH

But what if he really is?

RAHAB

Oh, really, Dinah.

DINAH

For centuries we've waited for the Messiah. Maybe this man Jesus is the one.

ABIGAIL

Come on . . . Have you seen this guy?

DINAH

Of course.

ABIGAIL

Does he look like a king to you? Someone to kick the Romans out of our land?

DINAH

Well—

RAHAB

This Jesus is about to be put away for good . . . and the Romans are still in charge. Now, don't you think a king would have taken care of that little detail before leaving?

ABIGAIL

Honey, I know you feel badly for him . . . I'm sure he is a very nice man. But at the moment . . . he's just a criminal.

Enter HORDEDEF and SEKHTI.

SEKHTI

(in a stage whisper)

There! There's a spring.

HORDEDEF

I'm not blind. *(stopping just short of the women; to Sekhti, but obviously to be overheard by the women)* Why, yes, I've heard the same, Sekhti. It is common knowledge that there can not be found more friendly, kind, and . . . compassionate women than the blessed ladies of Jerusalem!

Wise to the two merchants, ABIGAIL and RAHAB cast knowing looks toward each other. Meanwhile, DINAH offers SEKHTI her own waterbag.

DINAH

Please, have some of mine. The water from this spring is very sweet.

SEKHTI

(clearly smitten with the girl; innocently)

No more sweet than the one offering it.

ABIGAIL and RAHAB roll their eyes to heaven. RAHAB offers a drink to HORDEDEF.

RAHAB

(impatiently)

Not so much. You'll give yourself a belly-ache.

HORDEDEF

(after drinking)

Ladies, . . .

ABIGAIL

(sniffing the air)

What is that smell?

RAHAB

(sniffing)

Smells like . . . dead fish.

SEKHTI turns away from the others and checks his breath. Meanwhile, HORDEDEF moves in for a sale.

HORDEDEF

(to RAHAB)

You have been so kind. Allow me to repay your kindness with a small gift.
(digging into his bag)

ABIGAIL

(interjecting quickly)

Watch it, Rahab! You can't trust an Egyptian. The desert affects their brain.

HORDEDEF

(diplomatically, but irritated)

Madam, my partner and I are from the delta region, an area rich and fertile. *(he pulls from his bag a tiny vial and hands it to RAHAB)* Sweet essence, from one flower to another.

There are actually two scenes taking place simultaneously—one between HORDEDEF and RAHAB, and one between SEKHTI and DINAH. HORDEDEF is clearly only interested in a sale as he proffers a sample to RAHAB; but from the outset, they are adversaries. SEKHTI, on the other hand is rapidly falling for the sweet DINAH and he offers her a gift of perfume to win her favor. DINAH blushes and accepts the gift. While HORDEDEF and RAHAB have the dialogue, the scene between SEKHTI and DINAH is silent. As DINAH takes the vial from him, SEKHTI goes into his prepared speech.

SEKHTI

(a memorized speech)

The river Nile brings its life-giving silt and leaves it on our land—where we grow beautiful flowers which we turn into the sweet-smelling essence before you now. A fragile and exquisite blossom is crushed to extract the oils *(distracted by the pretty DINAH)* that will turn your soft skin . . . into a palette . . . of loveliness—

RAHAB

(harshly; breaking into the quiet moment between DINAH and SEKHTI)

Well, what else have you got?

HORDEDEF and SEKHTI distribute samples to each woman—and to some of the other people who have been drawn toward them. As they sample the fragrance there are oohs and ahs all around.

ABIGAIL

This stinking town could use some of their fragrance. The smell of death is all about us.

DINAH

(to Abigail)

You don't really think they would . . .

ABIGAIL

(not wanting to hurt the girl)

What else can they do? What else is there?

DINAH

Why should such darkness come upon one who brings us light?

ABIGAIL

You've always liked him, haven't you?

DINAH

(trying to form her thoughts)

There is such . . . peace in his words. I can't explain it. When you hear him speak, see the way he comforts those around him, . . . *(emphatically)* When you look into his eyes . . . What is there about him that frightens them so?

ABIGAIL

(with resigned cynicism)

He's different. And that's enough. Our people have based everything they are—everything they stand for on tradition. Anything new becomes a challenge to what is comfortable. And because of that, it's something to fear . . . something to hate.

HORDEDEF and SEKHTI have been listening to ABIGAIL and DINAH as they worked the crowd. Now they enter the conversation.

HORDEDEF

We've already heard much about this man. We were even warned to avoid Jerusalem all together because of him.

RAHAB

(rejoining the group)

You don't have to worry. This is a local affair. *(with satisfaction)* We won't be crucifying any Egyptians today. Just foolish prophets.

DINAH

Rahab! Please!

RAHAB

(to HORDEDEF and SEKHTI)

Stick around. It'll be quite a show.

DINAH

(painfully)

No!

ABIGAIL

(to Rahab)

Why do you torment her so?

RAHAB

(firmly)

She has to grow up. Might as well start now.

SEKHTI

(with fascination)

Everyone is talking about this prophet! What sort of man is he?

RAHAB

(contemptuously)

He's a man who claims to be God!

DINAH

Why do you fear him so?

RAHAB

(indignantly)

I don't fear anyone. The man's an irritation. I hope the Romans do get rid of him.

HORDEDEF

But, why the Romans? Isn't this prophet one of your people?

ABIGAIL

(with bitterness)

Our custodians only allow us so many judicial liberties. Besides, the Sanhedrin would never soil its hands.

DINAH

No, but it would pass the judgment.

ABIGAIL

A subtle distinction.

DINAH

(out of frustration; a bit too loudly)

Well I say they are all cowards!

Both ABIGAIL and RAHAB try to silence DINAH.

ABIGAIL

Shush, girl! We don't need that kind of trouble.

SEKHTI

But what has this man done?

ABIGAIL

(beginning to move away with Dinah and Rahab)

We've already said more than we should. Maybe you should have gone around Jerusalem.

HORDEDEF

(chasing after them; always the salesman)

But ladies, you didn't buy anything!

RAHAB

Go sell to the Romans. They're the only ones with money.

Exit ABIGAIL and RAHAB, leading DINAH away—who looks back to SEKHTI. The rest of the crowd begins to thin out.

HORDEDEF

I think the lady is right. This trip has been cursed from the beginning. Get our things; it's time to go back home.

SEKHTI

But you were the one insisting we stay.

HORDEDEF

I can change my mind, can't I?

SEKHTI

(thinking about Dinah)

I think we need to stay for a while longer. What they say about this man interests me.

HORDEDEF

(incredulous)

What in the world are you talking about?! An obscure Jewish prophet who's about to be crucified? What is he to us?

SEKHTI

Nothing. Yet.

HORDEDEF

Sekhti, you've always left the thinking to me. Now is not the time to be—
HORDEDEF is interrupted by sounds and voices of an angry crowd offstage.

SEKHTI

Look, we haven't made one sale since we got here. My hands are still empty. Maybe before we leave I can find something else of value.

HORDEDEF

Listen to those people! They're about to crucify your thing of value.

SEKHTI

(determined)

I'm staying.

HORDEDEF

You're a stubborn mule, Sekhti.

As they both exit.

SEKHTI

Are you with me?

HORDEDEF

A stubborn, ignorant, selfish mule!

The crowd noise swells as they exit and the lights dim.

Everyone is left to face this turning point from their own perspective. Sekhti is curious; Hordedef is impatient. Peter, brave enough to venture close to the trial scene has suddenly lost his courage, running into the night and a confrontation with his shame.

An anxious member of the council struggles with his courage; should he reveal his own allegiance to this one on trial, risking expulsion from that august body, or should he remain silent—and safe? And at the center of it all stands a man accused of blasphemy—and guilty only of the truth.

End of Act One

ACT TWO

Scene One

Production Note: This scene is actually two scenes taking place simultaneously, using opposite areas of the stage. While one scene is the focus of attention, the other should be blacked out, with the actors frozen.

Time: Late Friday Morning

Place: A quiet garden

Lights up on DINAH, seated C.S. She is quietly weeping, head in hands.

Enter SEKHTI.

SEKHTI

(happy to see her, but cautiously; he doesn't know her that well)

Dinah! Why are you here? *(pause)* You've been crying.

DINAH

There was nothing else I could do.

SEKHTI

Have they done it?

DINAH

Earlier this morning. *(beginning to cry; long pause)* It was horrible. No one should have seen what I saw . . .

SEKHTI

Where was—

DINAH

(clenched; angry)

No one should have to go through what he is going through!

SEKHTI

Couldn't anyone stop it?

DINAH

(with bitterness)

The ones who could have stopped it were the ones driving the nails.

SEKHTI

(with youthful awe)

I've never seen a crucifixion.

DINAH

I hadn't before today. But I had to. I felt that, if I wasn't there, I would be betraying him somehow. *(pause; frustrated)* Why? Why such a gentle man—a good man . . .

SEKHTI

(with a little smugness)

Oh, they're usually the first to go.

DINAH

Well, aren't you the smart one!

SEKHTI

I didn't mean it like that.

DINAH

(becoming hysterical)

Jesus was more! He wasn't just a good man. The world's full of good men. *(bitter; angry)* And the world's full of bad men, who have to destroy the things they don't understand.

SEKHTI

(trying to calm her)

Why is everyone talking about Jesus? What makes him so special?

DINAH

(after thinking a moment; quieting down)

Have you ever looked down into a baby's face? *(enjoying the pleasant imagery)* They smile at you with such deep, black eyes—why, you almost fall right into them! And they look up at you with such open trust and love. There's nothing held back. What you see in their faces, their eyes, is what

is in their hearts. (*looking directly at SEKHTI*) I don't know if I can tell you about Jesus. (*tears again*) I don't know if I can tell you about my Lord . . .

SEKHTI

(*compassionately, yet eager*)

Please try. (*hesitantly touching her to console*) I really do want to know. How did you meet him?

DINAH

I've known him less than a week, you know. My friend, Abigail, and I were at the city gate, collecting our water, when we suddenly found ourselves caught between two crowds. Coming at us was a dusty group laughing and shouting. Another group poured through the city gate to meet the first. And in the middle of it all sat a quiet man riding a donkey. I was still a good distance from him, but even then I saw in his eyes something that attracted me. (*blushing from the look SEKHTI is giving her*) Oh, not like that. Not as a man. How can I explain? It was as if seeing his face, I was suddenly reminded of all the things I'd ever searched for—and now had found. All the happiness—the peace—that had been missing from my life I found in his face.

SEKHTI

(*innocently*)

They say there was the same countenance about our late king, the great Rameses . . .

DINAH

(*irritated*)

I'm not talking about charisma. Jesus is not just some politician who can sway a crowd.

SEKHTI

(*now irritated himself*)

You keep getting angry with me! I have no basis for understanding this person! How am I to know who he is—without knowing who he is not? Messiah! Messiah! That's all I hear! Half the people worship this man because they say he is God come down as man—and the other half hates him because he says he is and they don't believe! Which is he?

DINAH

He is God!

SEKHTI

(crossing to DINAH)

Well, the closest I have to that is Pharaoh! Since Caesar, Egypt has not had it's own king. But when we did, *(with awe)* he was a god. He was Son of the Sun! Lord of the Two Lands! A god among us.

DINAH

And do you believe that?

SEKHTI

That's what the priests tell us, and from childhood we are taught to believe what the priests tell us.

DINAH

We too are taught to believe the priests. But our priests don't believe Jesus. They say he's a fraud and a blasphemer.

SEKHTI

Dinah, I don't know your people or their ways. *(with a gentle smile)* I don't even know you that well. And I've never met this man Jesus, but he's left his mark on you and I suddenly find myself wanting to hear more . . .

After SEKHTI says: "he has left his mark on you", lights begin to cross-fade to S.R.

Enter CAIAPHAS, followed by NICODEMUS. CAIAPHAS is weary from the all-night trial of Jesus. He has given private audience to NICODEMUS, who has been up until this moment a respected member of the Sanhedrin, over which CAIAPHAS presides.

CAIAPHAS

As if I hadn't enough occupying my mind.

NICODEMUS

Lord Caiaphas, . . .

CAIAPHAS

And you think you can successfully plead this man's case where he himself failed so miserably?

NICODEMUS

I can't improve upon his eloquence.

CAIAPHAS

(enraged)

Eloquence? *(quieter)* The man's a buffoon.

NICODEMUS

(what has he got to lose)

You don't believe that.

CAIAPHAS

How dare you!

NICODEMUS

You don't put to death buffoons.

CAIAPHAS

(uneasily)

No one takes this sad person seriously.

NICODEMUS

You're afraid of him.

CAIAPHAS turns, indignant.

NICODEMUS

(insistent)

You're afraid of him, Caiaphas. He's not a buffoon—he's a threat! A threat to your power.

CAIAPHAS

How dare you abuse this office so!

NICODEMUS

(gathering his courage)

It no longer matters. I renounce my standing as a member of the Council.

CAIAPHAS

(stunned)

You what?

NICODEMUS

I now claim as my master, this one you have just consigned to death.

CAIAPHAS

(incredulous)

You're not only insulting, but making a very dangerous—and costly—mistake.

Lights cross-fade immediately to DINAH and SEKHTI, S.L., at the end of CAIAPHAS' line.

DINAH

I'm only a simple woman. There's much about Jesus I don't understand. There's mystery in some of the words he speaks, *(chuckling)* but since he's mystified our scribes, I'll not feel badly that I'm confused. In the short time I've known him, Jesus has touched my heart more than my mind. His words fill me with peace, and *(soberly)* just a bit of sadness. And a hunger to hear more.

SEKHTI

He sounds like a great teacher.

DINAH

(standing; amused)

Teacher? Since when have you heard a "teacher" speak to God as his Father?

SEKHTI

Our teachers and Priests in Egypt speak to the gods all the time! And they address them as children to a parent.

DINAH

Yes, but when did you last hear that parent reply?

SEKHTI

Never underestimate the sorcery of an Egyptian Priest.

DINAH

(angered)

Sorcery! *(regaining her composure)* Sekhti, you believe what you wish. I can only tell you what I have seen and heard.

It was just a few days ago when Jesus was speaking to His disciples and a small company of Greeks. As always, the moment he began speaking a crowd gathered. I hurried to hear his words. Since that first day, I found myself being drawn closer to him, being drawn away from . . . *(searching for the words)* . . . from my old life, my old friends. Their companionship had become something brittle and uncomfortable. They had a most unkind response to my new life. So, I spent my time with my new friend: Jesus. *(smiling at SEKHTI)* And I felt no loss.

(soberly) He was very serious this day, troubled, with an intensity that was almost frightening. In a very strong voice he said, “The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified!”

(excitedly) Sekhti, how can I tell you that more than the words he spoke, it was the authority with which he spoke them that astounded us?! He spoke them as one with all authority before men. I know it sounds absurd, but I heard the authority of God in his voice. He stood, and with those penetrating eyes he looked at each one of us—I swear he looked right at me—me! He said, “If anyone wishes to serve me, let him follow me; then where I am, my servant also will be. And if anyone does choose to serve me, the Father will honor him.”

SEKHTI

(after a beat; thoughtfully)

Serve him how?

DINAH

(caught off-guard)

Ugh, I’m not really sure.

SEKHTI

Bring his meals? Carry his water? Run errands for him?

DINAH

(after a moment's thought)

There's another level of serving . . .

Cross-fade to CAIAPHAS and NICODEMUS.

NICODEMUS

I was hoping you might see.

CAIAPHAS

(exasperated, and feeling persecuted)

Why are you doing this to me?

NICODEMUS

I'm not doing it to you—or anyone else, for that matter. I'm doing it for me.

CAIAPHAS

(with quiet--yet gradually rising--menace)

Nicodemus. I care nothing for you or your precious new faith. If you choose to believe the blasphemous rantings of this . . . man, then proceed—at your own risk. And if there were no other considerations, I would run you out of town myself, gladly. But there are considerations. The Council is much bigger than the collection of its members. And the Council is much more important than the soiled reputation of one of its members. I will not have this august body compromised by your preposterous loyalties. I would gladly bring upon you disgrace of the most public kind—but I will not. I will not subject our governing Council to such infamy.

You represent all that is the worst of your generation! You care nothing for our rich heritage. You so easily discard centuries of tradition for something still in its infancy! You and your kind are never satisfied. And your sedition infects us like a cancer.

I detest you. And I detest this Jesus and what he has done to us.

NICODEMUS

(with stronger conviction)

You've done it to yourself, Caiaphas. You won't allow yourself to see the truth in what Jesus says. He is the Christ—and you resent the fact that he is without your permission.

CAIAPHAS

You'll regret this, Nicodemus. You've been blinded!

NICODEMUS

(smiling confidently)

I guess I have. Blinded by his light.

CAIAPHAS

(furious)

Get out!

NICODEMUS

(shaking his head)

You think you're still in charge. You think all this is your doing. *(pause)* For once God really is in control. You've just done exactly what he intended. You've just fulfilled the destiny of his Son—and established the end of your meaningless traditions.

NICODEMUS exits, leaving CAIAPHAS in a seething rage.

Lights cross-fade to SEKHTI and DINAH.

DINAH

. . . and there is a love that transcends any earthly love. I've always dreamed of my marriage and how I would love my husband with all my heart. But that love pales against the love I feel for Jesus.

SEKHTI

But Dinah, he's hanging on a cross—dying.

DINAH

(with a weary shrug)

Oh, how can we know. *(pause; beginning to cross to C.S.)* That same day, while he was speaking with us, one of his disciples—the one called Simon Peter—asked Jesus a question. From where I was I couldn't hear what

was asked—but suddenly Jesus stood with a most peculiar look on his face and said: “And what should I say? ‘Father, save me from this hour?’” He looked at us all, and I could feel the agony in his soul. You could see it in his eyes. Such pain. Such love. Then he said: “It is for this very reason I came to this hour.” *(DINAH finishes this line with a distant expression on her face as she—with this retelling—reaches a deeper understanding of Jesus’ purpose)*

SEKHTI

(after a thoughtful pause)

He came to die?

DINAH

(smiling)

Yes. I see it now.

SEKHTI

(failing to understand)

I’m lost.

DINAH

(taking SEKHTI by the arm)

Lost. That’s it, Sekhti. You are lost. We all are—until we believe that Jesus is dying for us.

SEKHTI

(incredulous)

But why should he die for me? He doesn’t even know me!

DINAH

But he does! He always has.

SEKHTI

(drawing closer; blurting out impetuously as he looks into her eyes)

I love you, Dinah!

DINAH

(caught by surprise)

What? *(almost giggling)* What are you—

SEKHTI

(with more courage)

I'm saying I love you. *(as DINAH tries to speak)* Don't say it. I already know it's crazy. I've never been so twisted up inside like I am now. *(moving away)* I can't explain it. The first time I saw you, my insides flipped over. *(looking at her)* You are so pretty. But then you started telling me about Jesus. I don't know why, but somehow that made you all the more beautiful—beautiful inside. *(drawing closer)* Dinah, I've fallen in love with you. And I think I'm falling in love . . . with Jesus.

The lights begin to fade.

DINAH

(looking deeply into SEKHTI's eyes)

Yes. I think you are.

End of Act Two

ACT THREE

Scene One

Time: Friday afternoon, about 6:00 pm

Place: Just inside Jerusalem city wall

Props: 25-50 lb. bag of kitty litter

Coins

Same props for Egyptians from Scene One

As Lights come up, there is a great commotion in the city, with people bustling about, pushing and shoving, great agitation. Enter NICODEMUS into the raucous milieu. He is accompanied by his servant, ARTEMUS, who is struggling under the weight of a large bag of spice (roughly the size of a 25 lb. bag of kitty litter). NICODEMUS is operating under a caustic mix of emotions: He has just forcefully stated to Caiaphas his allegiance to Jesus (thereby alienating the High Priest and most of the Sanhedrin), which has given him a fresh—if grim—determination to continue with his new-found courage; yet he is saddened by the death of his Messiah, and would rather be off somewhere expressing his sorrow privately; over all is his devotion and adoration for Jesus, which has led him to spare no expense in arranging for an extravagant amount of spices for Jesus' burial.

NICODEMUS and ARTEMUS move DSR.

ARTEMUS

(complainingly)

May I rest, lord?

NICODEMUS

Yes, of course. *(the servant drops the bag and sits, rubbing his sore shoulder)*

I don't see him. We'll give him a few minutes. Is it that heavy?

ARTEMUS

(panting)

It seems an excessive gift, master?

NICODEMUS

I owe Him more than this.

ARTEMUS

A dead man?

NICODEMUS

Jesus saved me from the law. Like you, Artemus. In three years you'll have repaid me. Your life will be returned to you and you'll be free of the law.

ARTEMUS

At least, your law.

NICODEMUS

Someday you'll be free of more than that. Someday you'll know, my friend. I want you to know Jesus and the freedom He offers. But I also want you to never be afraid to link your name with His. *(angry and ashamed)* I was afraid—afraid that I would somehow be diminished by calling Him Lord. I was worried that my esteemed colleagues would laugh. *(pause)* Derision is a sharp knife, Artemus, but not nearly as sharp as my guilt. *(pause)* Then I went to the hill, and saw Jesus on the cross. This one I had secretly called Lord was being publicly humiliated on my behalf.

Enter HORDEDEF, angrily searching for his companion, SEKHTI. He occasionally grabs someone to ask if they have seen his partner; they all shrug him off as an annoying foreigner. HORDEDEF mumbles to himself as he searches.

HORDEDEF

(mostly mumbling to himself; all the while making inquiries of the crowd and trying to make some sales)

. . . had no business coming here in the first place . . . lousy time of the year . . . depressed economy . . . how's a man supposed to make a living?

. . . the last time I bring along that good-for-nothing Sekhti! . . . takes off, doesn't tell me . . . Neferma is going to kill me!

NICODEMUS

(approaching HORDEDEF; with impatient formality)

Are you the merchant from Egypt?

HORDEDEF

(sharply)

What's it to— *(recognizing NICODEMUS' position by his dress; respectfully — but not submissively)* Yes, lord.

NICODEMUS

What do you have for a burial?

HORDEDEF

(cautiously)

I don't know your ways here, *(gesturing to the servant's burden)* but you seem already well-supplied.

NICODEMUS

I'm told that you deal in spices, unguents—essence.

HORDEDEF

Only the finest.

NICODEMUS

(wise to the salesman)

Of course. I need something special. I've brought along all I had—but it's not enough. *(choking a bit on the words)* A very good friend of mine requires burial.

HORDEDEF

(always the salesman)

I'll be perfectly honest with you, *(staring into his bag)* business has been brisk. Our stock is down to practically nothing. I'm just not sure . . .

NICODEMUS

Expense doesn't matter.

HORDEDEF

(quickly)

I've got just what you're looking for.

NICODEMUS

I thought you might.

HORDEDEF

A singular fragrance, an aroma unsurpassed even in our own land—
(pulling a small, alabaster vial from his bag) a mysterious blend of precious
spikenard and myrrh, aged in this alabaster jar for more than a decade.

NICODEMUS takes the jar, opens it, and sniffs.

HORDEDEF

Unique, is it not?

NICODEMUS

It's fragrance is as elusive as your honesty. What's your price?

SEKHTI

(who has entered unnoticed)

You may have it at no cost.

*HORDEDEF practically swallows his tongue at the suggestion, but
continues unabated.*

HORDEDEF

(to NICODEMUS—without turning to react to SEKHTI)

Please excuse my partner. He's been too long in the sun.

SEKHTI

(crossing to them; to NICODEMUS)

Sir, isn't that for Jesus.

NICODEMUS

(unsteadily)

Yes . . .

SEKHTI

Then there is no charge.

HORDEDEF

(grabbing SEKHTI by the arm)

Have you lost your mind?!

SEKHTI

You don't understand who this is for.

HORDEDEF

(angrily)

Oh yes I do. It's for that lunatic. When are you going to learn, Sekhti?

SEKHTI

He's not a lunatic!

HORDEDEF

When are you going to stop being so gullible?

NICODEMUS

Gentlemen! Stop this! I'm not interested in your quarrel. I'll take the essence—and I'll pay your price. *(handing HORDEDEF some coins)* This should suffice.

HORDEDEF quickly accepts the coins, his expression of happy surprise showing that the amount offered is indeed sufficient.

SEKHTI

(grabbing the money from HORDEDEF and returning it to NICODEMUS)

No! We can't accept it. Not for Him.

NICODEMUS

(calmly, yet firmly returning the money to HORDEDEF)

You'll take my money. I'll not offer my Lord a second-hand gift.

HORDEDEF

(clutching the coins; glaring at SEKHTI)

If you insist.

NICODEMUS

(turning to ARTEMUS)

It's time to go. Joseph will be expecting us.

ARTEMUS shoulders his heavy bag and exits; NICODEMUS follows, but is stopped by SEKHTI (ARTEMUS continues out).

SEKHTI

(stopping NICODEMUS)

But sir! Why won't you allow us to offer Jesus a gift?

NICODEMUS

(turning and studying SEKHTI for a moment)

Are you a believer? Do you already know why Jesus did what He did?

SEKHTI

I think so.

NICODEMUS

Then give Him the gift of your life.

NICODEMUS exits. SEKHTI and HORDEDEF stand silently watching NICODEMUS leave.

SEKHTI

(abruptly turning)

I have to go.

HORDEDEF

Now just a minute. You can't go running off again. We have to get back.

SEKHTI

Don't worry.

HORDEDEF

Where are you going?

SEKHTI

Listen, it's almost dark. We can't leave until morning anyway. If I'm not back by dawn, you leave without me.

HORDEDEF

But I can't—

SEKHTI

(firmly; with a new-found maturity)

It's all right. Either way, it's all right.

SEKHTI exits.

HORDEDEF

But Sekhti...! *(to audience)* Oh, Neferma is going to kill me!

Scene Two

Time: Later that night

Place: Abigail's home

Props: Table

Pile of blankets

ABIGAIL and DINAH are folding blankets, C.S., as the scene opens.

ABIGAIL

This means a lot to you, doesn't it?

DINAH

More than you know.

ABIGAIL

It's not as easy for me. I've always been a practical woman—
everything has to make sense in my world. I don't like being off-balance.
(to DINAH; emphatically) And every time you start talking about Jesus I feel
off-balance! *(moving away)*

DINAH

(lovingly)

I've always looked up to you, Abbie. You know that. And both of us have
grown comfortable with you having all the answers. But now it's different.
Now I have an answer that didn't come from you.

ABIGAIL

Does he make you happy?

*DINAH is momentarily confused. Which "he" does ABIGAIL mean? As
she sorts out her thoughts, she begins giggling.*

ABIGAIL

What did I say?

DINAH

Well, at the moment there are two “he’s” in my life. And you think you’re off-balance! *(pause; moving away)* My Lord has just been buried—killed by the Romans and our leaders—and I don’t know whether to be sad or happy over that. But then there’s another man—and yes, I think he makes me very happy.

ABIGAIL

You don’t mean — *(DINAH nods her head)* — not that crazy perfume seller. Dinah! Will you never learn?

DINAH

I don’t expect you to understand—because I don’t. All I can tell you is that I’m not the same person I was a few days ago. It’s too much—too great a mystery. There is a man—a flesh and bones man—who claims to be God Himself. That man captured my heart in a way I never thought possible. Then some very pious, wicked men killed Him. *(incredulous)* Dead. Then He was buried in a borrowed tomb and the door sealed. *(with intensity)* And the mystery is that I know that from this day on, that man will be controlling every part of my life.

ABIGAIL

(after a pause)

But—does He make you happy?

DINAH

(beaming)

Oh yes, He does. And I so much want you to know that happiness.

ABIGAIL

(cautiously; stiffly)

Perhaps. But now let’s get back to this Egyptian. Surely you realize—I mean, how can you . . . What I’m trying to say is—be careful.

DINAH

(with a twinkle in her eye)

Perhaps. Perhaps.

Scene Three

Time: Saturday morning, around dawn

Place: A quiet garden

Props: All the Egyptians' belongings

Enter SEKHTI, looking for DINAH. She's not around, so he waits, a little looking around, a little pacing, a little thinking. After a few moments, he suddenly glances up, then, almost embarrassed, looks down at his feet. He tries again, but is profoundly uncomfortable with the idea of addressing his new God. But then finally, he gathers his courage and speaks.

SEKHTI

I don't know what to call you. All my old gods had names. What's your name? Or should I just call you Jesus, because His name is the only one I have for you? *(not sure he's getting anywhere)* I have to tell you, it feels awkward praying to a god I can't see. On the other hand, I could always tell those other gods weren't listening to me. They would just sit there with a stupid look on their face—and you could just tell they weren't hearing a word you said.

DINAH quietly enters Upstage of SEKHTI, without his knowing.

SEKHTI

(continuing)

We're new to each other. My name's Sekhti. And I hope you're hearing this. I'm not sure what I want to tell you. If you are responsible, you've thrown a lot of confusing things into my life lately. No offense intended. First Dinah . . . Isn't she pretty? Well, of course you know that. Then all this business with the crucifixion . . . But then, you know that, too. I don't know what to say to you! My heart is saying things without words. Do you speak Egyptian?

Well, this is all very new to me. I guess I just wanted to say, I'm not much, but if you'll have me, I'm yours.

DINAH

Don't worry, He'll have you.

SEKHTI

(happily surprised; crossing to DINAH)

Dinah!

DINAH crosses to meet SEKHTI about C.S.; they embrace.

SEKHTI

(after the embrace)

That was a private conversation.

DINAH

I'd like to share it with the world.

SEKHTI

Are there words for this feeling?

DINAH

(after a beat)

No.

SEKHTI

(exuberantly)

I didn't think so. *(moving away; with gathering excitement)* But something inside me wants to break out! And every time it tries, it catches in my throat—like wanting to tell someone how you feel about them, and by the time the words get from your brain to your mouth, they just sound foolish.

DINAH

I know that feeling. It's the excitement Jesus puts into your heart. It's the joy of it all—the need to tell others about him.

SEKHTI

Too many changes. How can I tell others of something still so confusing to me?

DINAH

Just live your life, Sekhti. But live it as one who has seen the Christ!
Remember, a few of us have been with Him. We've seen Him, heard His
voice—looked into His eyes. A few of us—even you.

SEKHTI

I came here looking to fill my bag with gold. I'm leaving with my heart filled
with a gift from a stranger.

DINAH

Jesus is no longer a stranger.

SEKHTI

And I'm no longer the person I was. *(happily)* I don't want to leave—I can't.

DINAH

(gently)

There's no life for you here.

SEKHTI

(a little stunned)

And there's no life without you.

DINAH

Take the person you are now back to Egypt. Share the gift with them.

SEKHTI

Not without you.

DINAH

I can't go.

SEKHTI

But I thought . . . I mean, weren't you paying attention last night?

DINAH

You know it would never work.

SEKHTI

(quickly serious)

No, I don't know that.

DINAH

We've shared something special—something I'll never have with anyone else.

SEKHTI

(sarcastically)

Next you'll say you think of me as a brother.

DINAH

I'm not saying that.

Enter HORDEDEF carrying their bags.

HORDEDEF

(shouting to SEKHTI)

I thought I'd find you here.

DINAH takes the opportunity to move away from SEKHTI.

SEKHTI

(distracted, needing to reply to HORDEDEF, but not wanting to lose DINAH; to HORDEDEF)

I told you to wait for me.

HORDEDEF

Well, I thought you might have found a distraction, so, uh . . . *(gesturing off-stage)* how about it?

SEKHTI

(as DINAH moves further away)

Dinah, wait! *(to HORDEDEF)* You wait, too. *(going to DINAH; after a pause)*

There has to be more.

DINAH

I don't want this, either. But it's the way it must be.

SEKHTI

But why? Am I to lose you on the day I find my Lord? I love you, Dinah. How can that be wrong?

DINAH

Love is never wrong. But our love has become entangled with our love for the Savior. Tell me you can tell them apart.

SEKHTI

Why must they be divided?

DINAH

One of us has to come first. Can you choose?

SEKHTI

(trying, but he can't)

No.

DINAH

Neither can I. There may come a day, but right now my love is too young—for both of you. *(she goes to him)* Sekhti, we both have a new master. He will tell us when it's right.

SEKHTI heaves a sigh of resignation and takes DINAH into his arms. They cling to each other for a moment, then:

SEKHTI

(gazing into her eyes)

I'll be back.

DINAH

In my heart, you will have never left.

Sekhti kisses her, tenderly, yet with barely restrained passion. Dinah responds, then they slowly draw apart, their eyes still in an embrace. Dinah says nothing, as Sekhti moves away, but gives him a reassuring smile.

SEKHTI

(whispering)

I'll be back.

DINAH exits, as SEKHTI watches her go. HORDEDEF moves DownStage to SEKHTI. He makes a big production out of draping SEKHTI's

belongings, one by one, onto him. All the while, SEKHTI, saying nothing, watches DINAH as she leaves.

HORDEDEF

(chuckling nervously; handing SEKHTI his things)

Boy, you had me going there for a minute! Well, you've always been one for the ladies. A real heart-breaker, you are! Yessir, never seen anything like it. Well, time to be going!

SEKHTI continues staring after DINAH; HORDEDEF stands behind, grinning stupidly at his companion.

SEKHTI

(dead-pan)

Hordedef, only a friend could tell you this. But *(turning to him)* you've got a big mouth.

HORDEDEF

(his feelings bruised)

Oh, so that's what your new girlfriend taught you!

SEKHTI

Did you get us something to eat along the way?

HORDEDEF

Yeah. *(rummaging through his bag)* Just a minute. *(pulling out a crust of bread)* A nice loaf of bread, and . . . *(pulling out a large of fish)* a nice, fresh fish.

SEKHTI

(taking the bread this time)

Couldn't you have done better this time?

As they exit.

HORDEDEF

Hey! What do you mean?

SEKHTI

And what am I supposed to wash this down with, huh?

HORDEDEF

Well, I think there's a stream about a half-day ahead . . .

Curtain

End of Act Three

End of *The Essence of His Death*

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