

Night was wrapped tightly around the small valley with its cluster of age-gnarled trees encircled by a low stone fence, but on the hill to the west the city was ablaze with lamp light, as its citizens celebrated Passover. In every home within the walled city of Jerusalem families were reclined around the traditional meal of roasted lamb, unleavened bread and bitter herbs. The wine had been passed the requisite four times; the Hallel sung, offering praise and thanksgiving to their God. The distant sound of voices whispered down, over the walls and into the valley, as families finished their prayers and began to make their way to the temple.

Who do you say that *J* Am?

SHARA: *Did you see what happened? Did you hear? I was too late. Oh, I was too late.*

ERASTUS: *There was nothing I could do—nothing but watch.*

HANANIAH: *He had no right—no right at all. I don't care who He is.*

SHARA: *Who is He?*

HANANIAH: *I was simply going about my business. Can't a man make a living?*

ERASTUS: *The soil's damp tonight. Fog setting in.*

SHARA: *They ordered the bread, they paid their money. I should have left it at that.*

HANANIAH: *I've rented that stall for six years. Been a member of the guild even longer. I've earned my rights and privileges!*

ERASTUS: *I don't think it'll rain—but it'd be a good night to stay in.*

SHARA: *They talked for hours, and I couldn't take my ear from the door. They spoke in such mysteries—especially Him.*

HANANIAH: *Just hear me out. I play by all the rules—all the laws—I keep my nose clean. I'm respected in the temple and in the city. People know me—and I know people.*

ERASTUS: *It was like it was all planned out—each person taking his part.*

SHARA: *It wasn't an ordinary Passover. It wasn't just ceremony. What they put to their mouths became something that connected them to their future.*

ERASTUS: *Things like this don't happen here.*

HANANIAH: *I like Him—I did like Him. He made a lot of sense. I believed the things He said.*

ERASTUS: *My garden's a place of peace. This has been an offense.*

SHARA: *My head burns—as if my ears have taken in more than it can bear at one time.*

HANANIAH: *My position's secure—at least it was until He went too far.*

SHARA: *He went too far.*

ERASTUS: *They went too far.*

Huddled beside the great stone olive press, his arms clutching his knees, Erastus rocked back and forth nervously, still stunned by the events just played out before him. No one had seen him; he had witnessed everything from behind the circular stone in which the olives from his grove were crushed to extract their oil.

The damp air sent a chill through him, and Erastus pulled his filthy outer cloak more tightly around his shoulders. What could it have meant? What was happening? What should he do?

Should he report to the authorities? No, the authorities were in on it—they were the ones arresting the man. Maybe he should just forget it ever happened. He doubted that were even possible. But who could he tell—and what would he tell them? The quick-paced thud of footsteps brought Erastus to his senses. He silently rose and peered over the top of the massive round press. A woman was approaching from the city.

As he stood, revealing himself, the woman continued toward him. “What happened here?” She said insistently.

What to say? How could he answer this stranger?

Stepping closer to him, she persisted. “Tell me what happened here. I have to know.”

“Oh, lady,” Erastus finally said, staring sadly at the ground, “It was a sorry sight.”

Frustrated, the woman said, “I was delayed. I was with them when they left their supper, but my husband had words with me. If I had only gotten here sooner! Can you tell me, then, where they went?”

Again, he wasn’t sure what to say. What was this woman’s connection to the crowd of people that had just departed his garden? Reluctantly, Erastus answered, “Ah, I can. I fear I do know where they went.”

Fairly exploding, the woman shot back, “Is this to be a riddle? Do you want me to *guess*?”

“No—no! That’s not it.” He sighed and turned away from her, his heart heavy and his mind filled with confusing images from the last hour. “It’s been a busy night in the garden.”

The woman dropped down onto the broad lip of the stone press. “Well, it’s been a busy night in the city, too. Do you know who they were?”

“You mean, you don’t?”

“I didn’t see their faces.”

“Then, why are you here?”

The woman shuddered from the damp air crouched heavily upon the valley floor. She pulled her cloak tightly about her. “One of them came to my bakery today, asking bread for the evening meal. Can you imagine! What nerve. Everyone else had placed their orders a week ago. But, I always plan ahead. They were staying nearby, so I told him I’d deliver in time for the meal.”

“Ah! I *knew* it,” Erastus interrupted, grinning. “I knew I could smell the hearth on you.”

“And there’s an aroma about *you*, too,” the baker snapped back, beginning, however, to like this ragamuffin gardener.

Erastus sheepishly wiped his hands down the front of his soil-encrusted robe, and passed a hand over his smudged face. His was a mostly solitary life, for which the social graces were rarely needed.

The woman continued her story. “Their house was just around the corner, and it was my last delivery. The boy who ordered it answered the door. He took my basket, but called over another to settle accounts.” She frowned, remembering the man. “This one was older, darker—oh, there were schemes passing behind those eyes. I wouldn’t turn my back on him, that’s for sure. His purse was small, of course, and I knew there’d be no tip. He didn’t even know me, but he didn’t like me—and, frankly, I didn’t much like him.”

“But I thought you said you never saw them,” Erastus said.

“The room was already darkened, you see. I could only make out shapes—that it wasn’t a family. It was all men in the room—and no servants. I was paid, and the door slammed in my face.”

Erastus suddenly sprang to his feet. “Sssshhh! Someone’s coming.”

The woman strained to hear any close sounds, but all she heard was the distant clatter of people in the streets of the city. “I don’t hear anything,” she said.

“But your ears are tuned for the city,” he said. “It’s a man. Could it be your husband?”

“Not a chance,” she said with a cynical laugh. “My husband’s already asleep with his favorite companion.”

Erastus raised an eyebrow. “You mean—?”

She laughed. “Oh no, not that. It’s the *grape* that he loves. His best companion’s a bellyful of wine.”

“Oh my. On Passover?”

“We’re Syrian—and my husband’s never let your laws come between him and his pleasure.”

“And how about you?” Erastus asked.

The woman shrugged her shoulders. “I’m a baker. I know the answers for hunger—not life.”

Retribution

The approaching footsteps grew louder, until even the woman could hear them. A moment later a tall, well-dressed man appeared out of the surrounding circle of trees. His robes were cut from a fine linen, with brilliant purples and gold trimming the edges. He glanced around the clearing, looking for something or someone, as if the two already present were invisible to him.

Erastus had lived many years—and most, by choice, well away from people as arrogant as this stranger. Having all his life occupied the lower rungs of the social ladder, he had little patience with pomposity, but had, over those years, adopted a rather sarcastic response to those who considered themselves his superior.

Finally the man’s imperious gaze fell on Erastus, and he said, “Well *you* aren’t who I was looking for!”

The bedraggled gardener hung his head, feigning shame over his lowly state. “I was a disappointment to my mother, too.”

Behind Erastus, the woman snickered.

Oblivious to their scorn, the man continued scanning about the clearing.

“There should be a group of men—with one in charge.”

“Just the two of us,” the baker woman answered. “Only my friend—” She stopped, realizing that she didn’t know the gardener’s name.

Not wishing her to be embarrassed, Erastus quickly stepped toward the man and interjected, as if introducing himself, “Erastus.” “Uh, my friend Erastus and me,” she echoed.

Brushing aside the courtesies—and ignoring the woman all together—the stranger said dismissively, “Have you seen, heard anything?”

With thinly-veiled solemnity, Erastus answered back, “What’d you have in mind?”

The man turned his steely gaze to the gardener. “Well, *you’re* an insolent cur.”

“No, I’m the gardener,” Erastus said, ignoring the insult. “And I just may be able to help you.”

“Then you *did* see them.”

“Relax. You seem troubled.”

“I don’t want to—”

“I was a disappointment to my mother, too.”

“Sit down,” Erastus almost ordered.

Grudgingly, recognizing he no longer had the upper hand, the man found a large stone and, after carefully arranging his robes, sat down.

“My friend Shara here,” Erastus continued, “was just telling me about her good husband’s love of wine.”

“More like devotion,” the woman chuckled. Then, suddenly realizing that she had not identified herself to the gardener, she added, “Wait a minute. How’d you know my name?”

“Oh, I know the name of *every* baker in town,” Erastus grinned, patting his rather substantial girth. “That’s *my* devotion.”

Quickly losing patience with these people, the man snapped, “You *said* you might be able to help me.”

Erastus gazed over to the better-dressed man, then made a grand show of taking his seat atop the stone olive press, settling in comfortably before answering, “Every spring I plant my seeds,” he began, patiently telling his tale. “I take my dibble and make a small hole in the soil. I drop in the seed, cover it up, and wait. I wait.” Casting a cool eye over toward the stranger, he added, “Impatience doesn’t serve a gardener.”

Desiring to do nothing less than box this insolent dirt farmer about the ears, the man, instead, heaved a great sigh and resigned himself to making his case.

“My name’s Hananiah. I’m a banker—a moneychanger at the temple. Here and there, bits and pieces at a time, I had heard the teaching of this new rabbi. I’d often find him sitting with his followers in the courtyard, giving them instruction and—yes, even healing people of their infirmities. Frankly, after the politics and back-room plottings of the temple, his words had the crisp ring of freshly minted coin. He made sense, and—by my estimation at least—didn’t seem to have an agenda.

“Earlier this week I was at work in my stall. It was a good day—business was brisk. I was planning on having an even *better* day when, out of the blue, Jesus storms into the temple, screaming—acting like a madman!”

At the name “Jesus” Shara and Erastus glanced at each other, recognizing the name.

“At first I was just watching,” Hananiah continued, “taking it all in, glad I was tucked back into the corner. But then he came right at me. Before I knew it, my table was on its head, my assets scattered across the floor—and I was being shoved out into the street!”

“I had heard of it,” Shara said excitedly, “but thought it was only gossip.”

“The worst you heard,” Hananiah said, “it all happened. He was like a man who had lost his mind.”

Still perplexed by the man’s motives, Erastus asked Hananiah, “So what brought you here? What—to ask His blessing?”

Hananiah stiffened. “I came here to give him a piece of my mind! There were rumors flying about the temple that something would be happening here tonight.”

Erastus was quickly taken back to the disturbing events that had taken place earlier that night in his garden. “Something happened here all right,” he muttered.

“Tell us, Erastus,” Shara said. “What *did* happen here?”

Malice

As the citizens of Jerusalem made their way to the temple, or retired for the night, the city quieted. The sound of their voices became more scattered and distant, and a gentle stillness moved over the valley. The damp rose closer in the garden, and the chorus of crick-

ets began in earnest. A pervasive sense of melancholy connected each of the three people who had begun the night happily unaware of the others.

Erastus pulled his cloak tighter about him, dipping his chin down inside the well-worn cloth. Again he recalled the sequence of events that had played out before him earlier. What had it all meant? And why—*why* did it happen? Sifting through his thoughts, at last he said, “The rabbi has been arrested.”

Shara gasped, astonished, but Hananiah just nodded his head knowingly.

“It’s true, Shara,” Erastus said apologetically.

“But why?” She said. “Who? The Romans?”

Hananiah answered her confidently. “No. No, it had to be the Council.”

“They were both in on it,” Erastus corrected him.

“Hmmm—” Hananiah smirked. “Now *there’s* an interesting alliance.”

“But what *happened*?” Shara insisted. “Nothing I heard would have caused this.”

“What would *you* know?” Hananiah said condescendingly.

“They were peaceful enough,” she snapped back. “In fact, the man I heard through that door wouldn’t have been a threat to anyone. He was so kind, so gentle.”

Hananiah grunted disapprovingly, remembering the commotion Jesus had caused in the temple. “We’re not talking about the same person.”

Ignoring the banker, Shara continued. “I sat at the top of the stairs—something holding me to that door. Most of the voices were only muffled vibrations that betrayed no more than maybe personality and mood.

I heard young men and old, both wise and foolish, attentive and distracted—even one who seemed out-of-place. But I knew who *he* was—it was the one who had paid for the bread. Something told me he was a stranger among friends.

“But there were words I *did* hear; they came from the rabbi. I don’t know why His words stood out: He spoke softer than the rest. And there was no malice in Him,” she said pointedly to Hananiah.

“Maybe you aren’t such a good judge of character,” he sniffed.

Shara moved menacingly toward Hananiah. “And you are?—mister moneybags who makes a profit off people’s worship!”

As Hananiah rose to confront the woman, Erastus jumped between them. “Stop it! Both of you!”

Hananiah and Shara grudgingly parted, growling dark thoughts toward each other.

“Isn’t it funny,” Erastus offered, trying to return calm to the moment, “how everyone has gotten so worked up over a peasant rabbi from Galilee? I mean, think about it: what if *I* began traveling about, speaking as the voice of God—not as a prophet, but as truly God’s Son. Would the authorities be so stirred up as they are with this man? Or would I just be laughed at?”

“That’s what He claims to be? God’s Son?” Shara exclaimed.

“Oh, yes. Hadn’t you heard?” Hananiah interrupted. “That was the authority Jesus claimed when He stormed into the temple. His position was that we were adulterating the very purpose of His house: *His* house, he called it. How do you reason with such a man?”

Erastus peered at Hananiah and answered him. “Reason. How does one ‘reason’ with the Son of God, Hananiah?” He said philosophically.

“So now you’re buying it?”

“If Jesus is nothing but a fool, why are the priests so angry? Why don’t they just let Him wither away quietly? Why don’t they

“If Jesus is nothing but a fool, why are the priests so angry?”

just wait for the people to tire of Him? They're only drawing more attention to Him."

"Maybe He's touched a sore spot?" Shara volunteered.

Hananiah grimaced. "Or maybe they've just grown weary of charlatans distracting people from the things of God."

"I don't know much about your God," Shara said after a moment's thought. "Maybe that gives me an advantage. Mostly what I know of Him I've learned from the 'professionals.' But if we're talking about the same God, then I learned something new about Him tonight—something I'd never heard before." She drew closer to the two men. "God's Son is a servant," Shara said, her voice fairly trembling with emotion. "He washes dirty feet and He listens to the cares of others. He loves and He forgives and He's ready even to *die* for that forgiveness."

Becoming bored with this baker woman's curious perspective, Hananiah mumbled condescendingly, "It's not uncommon, my dear, for a master to give—

"*This* Master," Shara shot back, "took the bread I had baked in my fire and called it 'His body.' Instead of using it to remember the past, He told them to eat it to remember Him in the future. He took wine and called it His blood, and instead of using it to remember an old covenant, He used it to say He was the *new* covenant. And when He said 'Father,'" she lowered her voice and turned toward Erastus, "I didn't know He was talking about Himself."

Shara's retelling of the scene in that upper room hung heavily in the silence. Hananiah tried to make sense of it, trying to fit those words into the context of his experience with Jesus: the gentle teacher—and the madman who had torn through the temple. Erastus moved away from the others, as if needing more space for his thoughts. He worked the chronology over in his head, placing the scene described by Shara before the one he witnessed in the garden. And what a scene it was. He knew he would never forget what he saw.

"He knelt," Erastus began, pointing off into the trees, "right over there. I was no more than a few feet from Him. I've never seen anyone so alone. I could almost feel the pain weighing Him down as He cried out to His Father. And I could hear the loneliness in His voice as He accepted His fate."

Erastus' voice was thick with emotion as he recalled Jesus' trial. He was a man unaccustomed to inaction—a man who met every challenge with a response—be it for himself or someone else. But for the first time in his long life, Erastus was helpless to do anything for this man so much in need. How could one lend aid to the Son of God?

Shara felt compassion for the older man welling up in her. She could hear the loneliness in his voice. "Are you alone here in the garden?" She asked quietly.

"My wife died ten years ago," he answered with a heavy sigh, but then immediately brightened. "But she died giving birth to our son. Oh, he's a fine lad. He runs the press for me—and already the girls are admiring his forearms. Ah, he's a fine lad. He has his mother's way with animals. Why, there's always a four-footed friend at his side—"

Sitting off to the side, Hananiah's patience had finally run out. "Where did they take Him?" He interrupted icily.

Not bothering to look at the banker, Erastus answered, "There were soldiers, and there were priests—and many others. It was a small army, but the priests were in charge. I'd say they took him to Caiaphas."

"Why so many for just one man?" Shara asked.

"Because He has many followers," Hananiah replied.

Erastus nodded his head in agreement. "Ah, I'm sure the authorities were expecting resistance, but mostly His disciples just faded into the night."

"Why did Jesus even come to the garden?" Shara said, shaking her head in disbelief.

Erastus said, "To be arrested, I suppose. This was no accident."

Hananiah added, "I told you: they plotted this from the temple."

"No, there was higher authority involved," Erastus corrected him. "I've never seen a man in that state before. I've never seen anyone in such distress. I can only think of one thing. When my boy was very young, he got into some bad olives. Oh, I thought he'd die—he was in such misery. But nothing like the misery I saw tonight. Jesus was in torment of soul."

"Because of the soldiers," Hananiah said, sure of himself.

Finally losing patience with Hananiah, Erastus shouted angrily, "Because this was the plan! Don't you get it? Don't you understand? He gave Himself up willingly. He knows what awaits Him—and He *still* did it."

"How could He know?"

"Because He's *God!*" Erastus shouted back, then got hold of himself. "He's God."

Death

Erastus turned away from the others, not trusting his emotions. Hananiah wanted to burst into laughter over the absurdity of what Erastus had just said—but something nagging at him held back that response. From the beginning he knew there was something

different about Jesus—He was certainly no ordinary man. But God? Actually God? That was too much even to consider. He despised the gardener for maintaining the upper hand in the argument—and he couldn't abide being made to look foolish before a woman. So he couldn't let things stand as they were. All he need do was remain above it all, then take leave of these two commoners.

"All right," Hananiah said with calculated reserve, "for the sake of argument, He's God. Tell me then: Why would God want to die?"

Erastus swung around to glare at Hananiah. Shara did the same. "Who said anything about dying?" Erastus said suspiciously.

"Your Chief priest isn't going to *kill* anybody," Shara added.

Kicking himself for revealing that he had known more all along than he had admitted, Hananiah sheepishly said, "He'd like to." Smarting from the silent accusations of Erastus and Shara, he blurted out, "Look, you have to admit, Jesus has come down pretty hard on the priests and scribes. He's been very public with His criticism."

Contempt for this man rising in him like fermented cabbage, Erastus said dryly, "So they're going to kill Him."

"They've made their plans."

"I'm not a religious man," Erastus began quietly, thoughtfully. "The time of sacrifice comes and I find ways to keep busy here in the garden. I'd rather hope to meet God *here* than pay for His blessing at the temple. And I tell you: He was here tonight. Jesus pulled Him down and wrestled with what He knew had to be. And they spoke with each other: Son to Father, man to God. And I heard enough to know that if He dies, it won't be because of any plans made by man. He'll die because His Father wants Him to."

Her voice filled with contempt, Shara said, "You Jews make me sick. Death surrounds you—and when it's not nearby, you seek it

"God was here tonight. Jesus pulled Him down and wrestled with what He knew had to be."

out. Blood runs from your temple mount as if it were the lifeblood of the nation.”

“Don’t criticize what you don’t understand,” Hananiah snapped at her. “God has ordered it.”

“Then your God has a blood lust—and I will *never* understand it.”

“Hananiah’s right,” Erastus once again intervened, “God *has* ordered it. And you’re right, Shara: blood *does* run from the temple.”

“And you serve this God?” She said, incredulous.

“I’m a gardener,” Erastus said simply. “I keep the trees and their fruit, and I produce the oil you use in your baking. We obey our God—even without understanding. That’s all we can do.”

“And you give Him what He demands.”

Now Hananiah answered. “He’s always demanded a sacrifice. Death is part of that.”

“So that’s what the priests are doing in killing Jesus?” Shara said. “Making a sacrifice?”

Hananiah responded, as if explaining to a child, “The temple sacrifice is for the sins of the people. The priests are sacrificing Jesus,” he added uneasily, “for the...*purity* of religion.”

“Tell her the truth,” Erastus demanded, anger rising in his voice. Hananiah bristled at Erastus’ challenge, but the gardener continued. “Tell her it’s not religion at all, but politics, and greed, and power.”

Hananiah sneered back contemptuously. “Look at this: a Syrian woman with flour in her ears, and a ragamuffin gardener who sleeps in the bushes. What gives either of you the right to criticize the actions of our rulers? What can this rabbi mean to either of you?”

Sacrifice

“Whenever I move a tree or a bush,” Erastus said, “I first cut away some of the old root system—giving the plant chance for a new start. I dig a round, deep hole, removing all the soil. Then I put a little back—a small mound, a *seat* for the plant. I carefully arrange the roots over the seat, press the plant down. Then the rest of the soil goes back in.

“I’m just a gardener,” he sighed. “I don’t know much about God, and I can’t explain much of His ways. I can’t describe the workings of the temple, or the methods of the priests. But tonight, somehow, this Jesus opened up a small cavity in me. He excavated—took out some bad roots that were cluttering things up. Then He carefully, gently, set a piece of Himself down inside—and then, He covered it back up.”

The city, covering the slopes of the nearby hills with its stone and mud houses, its businesses and well-traveled streets, and its huge stone temple watching over it all—the city now slept. The lamp light that had earlier illuminated the hills like the dazzling lights shining from a king’s crown, were now mostly extinguished. The quiet darkness of the valley crept up the sides of the hills, enveloping the city in the blanket of night.

In the heavier stillness of the garden three people sat silent, lost in their thoughts. Finally, breaking the silence, Shara spoke. “Are the priests doing wrong by arresting Jesus?”

Quick to defend his people against the heresies of this gentile, Hananiah snapped, “Of course not. They’re servants of God.”

“The priests are serving God, all right,” Erastus said, “but not how they think. They have it backwards. In their twisted minds they believe they’re using God to turn events to their advantage. But the Father of Jesus is really using *them* to write the history of His

Son. He will die,” turning to Shara, “blood will run. A sacrifice will be made.”

Not wishing to be rude to those he considered his guests, Erastus was nonetheless feeling penned up. He moved to the edge of the clearing, away from the others. He felt as if his silent, struggling thoughts would soon burst from his head and, unaccustomed to having others around, Erastus was uncomfortable with those prospects.

Hananiah stirred, brushed the soil and sand from the back of his cloak, preparing to leave. Impervious to the troubling emotional states of the other two, the banker believed that events had been wrapped up tidily and was ready to move into a tomorrow that, happily, would now not include the uncomfortable threats of this madman rabbi. “In any case,” Hananiah blustered awkwardly, “it would seem that the Council is taking care of the situation. Frankly, I’ll regret not having the opportunity to speak my mind to this man, but, apparently, others are seeing to my reprisal. With luck, I’ll regain my position at the temple and everything will be back

where it belongs.” He smiled grimacingly to the others. “I’d *like* to say it’s been a pleasure. Perhaps someday,” he said condescendingly to Shara, “I’ll have opportunity to buy some bread from you.”

Not the least intimidated by the wealthy moneychanger, Shara shot back, “Don’t bank on it.”

Hananiah considered delivering a smart rejoinder, but, deciding the woman wasn’t worth the effort, chuckled dismissively and swept out of the garden to return to his home in the city.

Shara was left feeling, as always, that she didn’t fit in. Her Syrian heritage meant that she would never be comfortable around the

likes of a person of the establishment such as Hananiah—nor could she identify with the Jewish commoner, such as Erastus. She was living in a place unlike any other on the civilized earth, a place where God Himself was as much a citizen as anyone else—in fact, the leading citizen. The very atmosphere of Jerusalem was tinged with Deity.

Yet the events of this night had touched her in ways still mysterious and strangely disturbing. It was as if she had breathed in some of that rarefied air, and some little bit of God had lodged in her lungs. But she had no idea what to do with Him.

She turned to the gardener and said, quietly, “Erastus?”

Caught deep in thought, staring back into the shadows of the olive grove, Erastus turned toward Shara. As he looked at her, his face was a mask of perplexed worry.

“Where’s Hananiah?” He said.

“Oh, the banker had some accounts to settle.”

In ways too uncomfortable to consider, Erastus suddenly realized that he didn’t want Shara to leave. And he knew that, after she left, after she returned to her business and her husband in the city, he would think of her from time to time, and would smile to himself, and only he would know why.

“Then you’ll be going too,” he said.

“A baker gets up early,” Shara said. “Doesn’t a gardener?”

Erastus sighed. “Always have before.”

“You sound as if tomorrow will be different.”

“It may be,” Erastus said, then continued, wistfully, “A very, very long time ago, there was a man who became the father of our people. God promised him he would have a son, but year after year his wife remained barren—until one day, finally, he had his son—his only son. That boy became the pride of his heart, his future, his legacy. But one night God tapped the man on the shoulder

“Tell her the truth, Tell her it’s not religion at all, but politics, and greed, and power.”

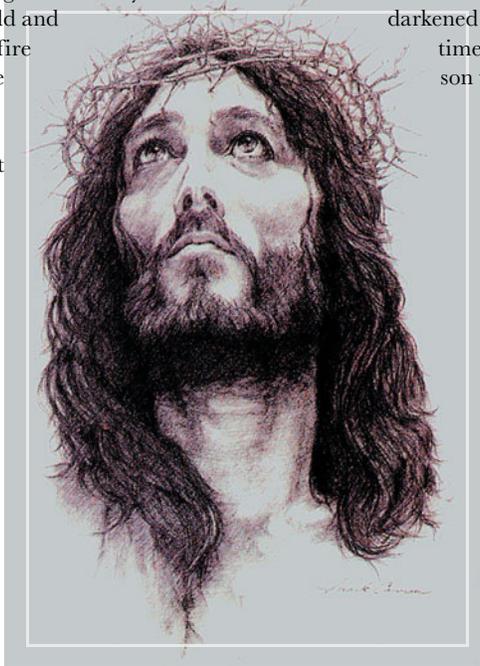
and told him to take that son to a mountain top and sacrifice him as an offering.

“The man didn’t understand why it was suddenly necessary to give up this thing for which he had waited so long. But he obeyed. The man and his son journeyed together to a cold and lonely place, and there the son himself built the fire and waited for the knife. And the man raised the knife, ready to plunge it into the heart of the only son of his own heart. And only then—only *then*—did God hold the man’s hand, and prevent him from sacrificing his only son.”

Erastus looked at Shara, his eyes filled with the dark mysteries of God. “It must be a terrible thing to sacrifice one’s son.”

Her heart breaking, Shara could only answer, simply, “Yes.”

“But I’m afraid this time,” Erastus said, gazing off toward the darkened slope that led away from the city gate, “this time there’ll be no one to stop it. This time, the son will die.”



HANANIAH: *This will pass. These things must take place from time to time.*

SHARA: *So much to know—but this is no time for learning.*

HANANIAH: *Growing pains. They’ll work themselves out.*

ERASTUS: *The fog’s coming in.*

HANANIAH: *Listen, He’ll get a fair trial—and a fair execution.*

SHARA: *Will someone else come along, or is He the one?*

ERASTUS: *It was all planned out.*

HANANIAH: *The important thing is that we retain the status quo.*

SHARA: *How could they do this to Him? And how can His words come to pass if He dies?*

HANANIAH: *If He dies—one less prophet. If He lives—one too many.*

ERASTUS: *I feel like an ancient sycamore that’s just been uprooted by a bad wind.*

SHARA: *I’m just a baker. That’s all. I bake bread. Why should this have anything to do with me?*

ERASTUS: *What has happened in my garden?*

HANANIAH: *What has happened to the world?*

SHARA: *What has happened to me?*

ERASTUS: *What has happened?*