

# Two Queens Save the World

## *Cast of Characters*

NARRATOR (= META), grown daughter of Vashti

VASHTI, daughter of Belshazzar, Persian

ESTHER, young cousin of Mordecai, Jewish

XERXES (= AHASUERUS), king of Persia

PAGE of Xerxes

3 DIGNITARIES of Xerxes

MORDECAI

HAMAN

DREAM VASHTI

TERESH (Conspirator 1)

BIGTHAN (Conspirator 2)

CHIEF OF POLICE

BERT, Police Officer

ZERESH, wife of Haman

HATHACH, eunuch and friend/servant of Esther

WOMAN 1

WOMAN 2

PHONE VASHTI (voice only)

ATTENDANTS of Haman

MUSICIANS

PEOPLE, PASSERSBY

GROUP of dancing girls

JEWS in mourning

COUSIN of Esther (non-speaking)

YOUNG META (non-speaking)

WOMEN of Esther

WOMEN of Vashti

*Empty stage. Far down right is a podium used throughout by the NARRATOR, with a gigantic book that she will read from, and a little light.*

NARRATOR (= Vashti's Adopted Daughter, META): You have perhaps heard the story of Purim before.

*NARRATOR asks audience for ideas about the plot & characters; listens to answers, responds a little.*

Well, that is all very good! But you may not have heard the whole thing. You may not have heard the part of the story that *I* am going to tell you today. Because *I was there*, and I know a little bit that the history books did not write down.

It all started a long time ago. Before *I* was even born yet, in fact. My mother was a little girl, living in a little town in the middle of Persia – that's Iran – where everybody knew each other. This town had a lot of streets, and houses, and streetlights, and trees, and playgrounds, and dogs, and cats, and mice, and egg-sellers, and bread-bakers, and candy-makers, and scholars, and wandering musicians, and wine merchants, and little kids who loved to play. My mother loved to play, too: her best friend in the whole world was a girl named Esther.

*During the speech, the different things, animals, & professionals have danced onto the stage, and a little town with a street has appeared as background; the small group of musicians is now sitting on the side, warming up. ESTHER and VASHTI enter together, holding hands. The candy maker gives them candy, and they thank her and pop it in their mouths.*

VASHTI: Hey, Esther, want to go play on the swings?

ESTHER: Sure, Vashti! Last one there is a rotten egg!

*They run off, laughing. The egg-seller looks after them, and grimaces, then checks his egg basket to make sure nothing is rotten.*

NARRATOR: The two were inseparable. They loved all the same books, and the same colors, and the same games. And even though one was Jewish and one was Zoroastrian, they never argued about religion. Well, they talked about it sometimes...

ESTHER: Hey! It's almost Rosh Hashanah!

VASHTI: What's that?

ESTHER: It's the Jewish New Year—didn't I tell you before?

VASHTI: No! "Rosh Hashanah"?

ESTHER: Yes, it means "Head of the Year"!

VASHTI: Cool. So, what do you do to celebrate?

ESTHER: Oh, we sing, and eat apples and honey, and all kinds of pies and cakes! My favorite is apple strudel.

VASHTI & ESTHER: Mmmmm.....

VASHTI: Our New Year is in March—it's still a long time away!

ESTHER: Oh, that's right—I forgot that Nowruz was in the spring! Well, celebrate with me now, and we'll have *two* New Years this year! I'm having a big party with all my girlfriends! I'll tell Dad— I mean, cousin Mordecai!

VASHTI: That sounds great! Then I'll have a New Year's party in the spring, and invite everyone, too!

ESTHER & VASHTI: We rock!

*ESTHER and VASHTI high-five each other and run off.*

NARRATOR: The two girls loved sleep-overs; they would sleep out under the stars, and swap stories about them.

ESTHER: Ooh! I can see the Bear! And Arcturus—that's Job's star! See it? Right out there behind the Bear's tail; the Bear is the one that shows you where the North Star is. You know how? Connect the front paws of the Bear, then go that way (*showing her*) in a straight line until you hit the first bright star, and...

VASHTI: Hey, it's the North Star! That's a great trick!

ESTHER: Easy, right?

VASHTI: And *that* bright one over there is a special star cared for by Ahura Mazda. He is God; he's the one who gives us the sun, light, life, love—all that is Good. You know those banners that all our soldiers carry?

ESTHER: Yes—I've seen them. They are black, and they have a silver star inside a gold circle, with wings.

VASHTI: Right! That's the symbol of Ahura Mazda—a star that brings the sun! When Mithra, the sun, rises, it's because the Great God, Ahura Mazda, wills it!

ESTHER: (*thoughtfully*) Hmm... So there is really only one God, also for you? Also for Zoroastrians?

VASHTI: That's right; only one God. We call God Ahura Mazda.

ESTHER: And we Jews call God Elohim—or sometimes Adonai, or Hashem.

ESTHER & VASHTI: (*smiling*) But we both know there's only ONE!

NARRATOR: As Esther and Vashti grew older, their friendship grew stronger as well. But finally there came a time when...

VASHTI: Esther, you are the only person I can trust with my secret.

ESTHER: Vashti, I would never betray anything you entrusted to me.

VASHTI: I know. That is why I am telling you this today: I have just found out that I am to be wedded to the King.

ESTHER: (*surprised*) Really? Oh my gosh—how did you find out?

VASHTI: Well, my mother knew from a long time ago, actually: she had kept it hidden from me that my father, who was a king himself in

Babylon once, had promised King Xerxes, our King, that he could marry me as soon as I came of age. She didn't want to tell me, because she hoped it might never happen, especially since my father went into the hospital and has not been mentally stable for quite a while; but next month I will turn eighteen, and the King remembered and sent for me by letter. That means I will need to go to the royal palace, and live there with the King's other wives.

ESTHER: (*uncertainly*) Well, it sounds a little crowded...

VASHTI: OMG, it's going to be awful. I have a favor to ask you.

ESTHER: Anything!

VASHTI: Will you promise to write to me, even if we can't have visitors?

ESTHER: (*firmly*) Vashti, *of course* I am going to write to you! And who knows? Maybe I'll be allowed to visit. What kind of room do you think you'll have?

VASHTI: (*groaning*) A big one, with lots of other people in it! The King has hundreds of wives. I probably won't even meet him for months or even years, and when I do he'll just pass right by.

ESTHER: (*dreamily*) Well, but who knows? He remembered you all these years: maybe the King is actually in love with you! Wouldn't that be romantic?

VASHTI: Yeah, right. Esther, you are living in a fairy tale!

NARRATOR: So, Vashti went to the great city called Shushan, where the King of Persia, Ahasuerus, was waiting for her. And it wasn't as bad as she had feared at first. The King actually seemed to like her.

*The scene has changed to the palace.*

VASHTI: (*writing a letter, lying on her bed*) Dear Esther, I miss you! Shushan is not a terrible place; King Xerxes is nice to me and seems to really love me; he told me at the wedding that he would do

anything for me or give me anything I desired, “unto the half of his kingdom”! But he’s a little too old to be a hottie. *(thinks a moment, then crosses out the last part, mumbling)* You just never know when they are reading your letters... *(continuing)* The palace is enormous, and the place is very sunny, which makes me happy. And I’ve made lots of friends—all the girls live here in this part of the palace, and it’s sort of like a big sleepover every night. *(looks a little sad)* Almost. But not quite. Anyway, I hope you will be able to visit soon. Big hugs to your Dad, I mean your cousin Mordecai, too. Love, love, love, Vashti. *(pauses, then writes)* P.S. I can still find the North Star.

NARRATOR: Vashti did well at the palace. She was very popular among the other wives, and she was a good planner, so with her as an organizer they held many parties. The decorations were amazing.

*Colorful streamers and other decorations appear all over the stage, brought in by the different characters, whom VASHTI directs here and there, while the Narrator speaks. The wine trader passes around glasses of red wine to everyone, including the Narrator, who toasts him.*

It was no surprise to anyone when King Xerxes came back from his winter vacation in the Greek Islands, and decided to show off his beautiful palace, and the interior design work of his lovely and talented wife Vashti *(shyly: that’s my Mom!)*, by having a huge party. He invited gazillions of dignitaries, from every part of the realm, to an International Festival at Shushan.

*A big banner is brought in with the words “Shushan International Persian Festival” on it. It also sports a picture of King Xerxes, and flags of different nations in the Persian Empire. PEOPLE mix onto the stage, wearing clothes from different regions, hats, etc.; the MUSICIANS play lively “ethnic” background music. XERXES enters and takes the mic from the NARRATOR, who steps down.*

KING XERXES (aka AHASUERUS): Friends, Persians, countrymen and women! Listen up! I am King Xerxes, and I and my beautiful Queen Vashti welcome you here to our fabulous capital city, Shushan! You come from all 127 provinces of the Persian Empire—you are Lydians, Indians, Arabians, Ethiopians, Assyrians, Babylonians,

Phoenicians, Armenians, Iranians, Scythians, Syrians, Greeks, and even Jews! (*At each name, there is a pause, and a cheer goes up from the crowd*) But you—we—are all also Persians! (*cheers*) It is the aim of my rule, the goal of my political career, to bring all of these various peoples under one roof, as one big family! (*cheers*) So have some food and drink, enjoy the music, dance your little hearts out, and ... er,... talk amongst yourselves!

*XERXES steps down, calls a few of the male dignitaries to him, and moves off to a banquet table on the side with them. VASHTI, in business attire, is catering; she goes with her women to a banquet table on the other side of the stage. General partying, dancing, singing. “We Are Family” comes from the speakers.*

NARRATOR: The festival was in full swing. People were dancing, and singing, ... and drinking...

*XERXES is having a few too many at his table. Some of his dignitaries are also sloshed.*

NARRATOR: ... and drinking... and... well, you get the drift.

XERXES: Dancing girls! (*claps hands*)

*A GROUP OF GIRLS in sexy clothing enters and dances for the men’s table to “We Are Family.”*

XERXES: (*during the dance, speaking to a dignitary in slurred tones; he is quite drunk*) You know, this is reminding me of something... what is it? aha, I know! Have you ever seen my newest, most beautiful wife, Vashti? (*dignitary nods, “Yes, I have, Sire...”*) Ah, you have? But you haven’t seen her *dance*, now, have you? (*horrified: “No, Sire!”*) (*confidentially*) She is amazing, you know—it’s getting me all hot and bothered just thinking about what she can do... in fact, I want her to come now and show you all! (*louder*) Dancing girls! Go home! (*claps hands; GROUP OF GIRLS exits*) Page! (*PAGE runs over*) Get my Queen here—tell her to come quickly!

PAGE: (*horrified*) But, but... Sire, she is catering the whole event, and leading the women’s banquet! She can hardly...

XERXES: (*impatiently, and clearly sloshed*) Oh, whatever she's doing, tell her to drop it, put on her crown and – and her sequined bikini – and come dance for me so these gentlemen can see how sexy she is! Now!

PAGE goes downstage, away from men's table, and pulls out his cell phone, calls VASHTI.

PAGE: (*whispering*) Your Highness! Pssstpsps (whispers inaudibly), now.

VASHTI: Hello? Hmm. Right. OK. He sounds a little drunk.

PAGE: (*audibly*) Yes, you could **say** that. (*glances over at XERXES, who has a lampshade on his head, & is dancing on the table*)

VASHTI: Tell him I'm kind of busy right at the moment.

PAGE: (*worried*) Yes, I, **I** can say **that**.

VASHTI (*looks at her clothing*) And I'm supposed to be catering—who is going to cover for me? (*Looks at her women for help; they shrug in helplessness.*) I'll... I'll come... But... he really wants me to **dance**?

PAGE: Um, yes, **you** could say that!

VASHTI: In front of **men**?

PAGE: Um... you could...

VASHTI: In ... in... in a... OK, he *must* be drunk! He'll regret it later, for sure—or **I'll** regret it, more likely!

PAGE: (*nervously*) Yes, you **could** say that!!

VASHTI: Tell him to take a few minutes to think it over, and then if he **really** still wants me to come, I'll do it. But (*hands one of her WOMEN a thermos, gestures*) give him some strong coffee first.

That's all. (*VASHTI hangs up phone. WOMAN walks thermos over to the PAGE, who hesitates, takes thermos, turns off cell phone & pockets it, & walks very slowly back to XERXES, who is hiding under the table*)

PAGE: Sire?

XERXES: (*totally sloshed*) Yesh?

PAGE: Uh... how can I put this?... Um, ahem: your Queen sends you greetings! (*hands XERXES the thermos*)

XERXES: Whuthehillisthis? (*Examines thermos, tosses it*)  
Whenzshegumbeehere?

PAGE: Uh... Queen Vashti... uh... asks that you... er... think it...

XERXES: (*exploding*) AAAAAAAAAAARGH! WHERRIZSHE?  
WHERRIZSHE? (*hunts around for Vashti, does not find her*)  
VAAAAAAAAASHALASHTI! LASHISHTISHI! SHHHHHHHH....

*XERXES falls asleep loudly; PAGE stands looking at watch; after 5 seconds of confusion among the men at the table, XERXES wakes up, grunting.*

XERXES: Vashti! (*to PAGE*) She said "no"?

PAGE: Well, um, not exactly...

XERXES: She said "no"! (*looks at men at table*) She said "no"!!

DIGNITARY 1: (*trying to smooth it over*) Hahaha, I have the same problem with my wife sometimes... (*XERXES glares at him; he is silent*)

DIGNITARY 2: (*catching on*) You're right, Sire! It's an outrage!

XERXES: An outrage!

DIGNITARY 3: An outrage! She should be grounded!

XERXES: Grounded! Confined to her room!

DIGNITARY 2: Given no allowance!

XERXES: No allowance!

DIGNITARY 3: Sent to bed without dinner!

XERXES: Without dinner!

DIGNITARY 2: Jailed!

XERXES: Jailed!

DIGNITARY 1: Jailed?

DIGNITARY 3: Jailed!

DIGNITARY 2: Divorced!

DIGNITARY 3: Exiled!

XERXES: (*forcefully*) Divorced **and** exiled.

*DIGNITARIES look at one another uncomfortably, and at XERXES. Silence.*

XERXES: You are right! (*They look at each other, shocked, point to their own chests, etc.*) I need to make an exshample of her, so that wivez (*looking pointedly at DIGNITARY 1*) do not disobey their husbands in the fushure. (*looks up to the sky, shakes fist*) Never again! (*passes out*)

NARRATOR: And so it was that my mother came to leave the palace. Which turned out not to be such a bad thing after all, since that is how she became my mother. But I am getting ahead of my story. Vashti, exiled, went back to the town where she had grown up, and looked for the only person whom she trusted.

VASHTI: (*tapping at window and whispering*) Esther? Are you there?

ESTHER: (*opens window; whispers*) Vashti! What are you doing here?

VASHTI: Oh, it's a long story. I'll write you later about it all. But I want to give you a few things. (*Gives her a little pouch. Esther reaches in and pulls out a tiara, a book with stars on it, and a cell phone.*) I have a feeling you may need these more than I do. Keep them for me, or use them – either way; what's mine is yours. Call me if it's important, but the minutes aren't unlimited, there's no texting, and they kept my recharger.

*ESTHER and VASHTI hug. VASHTI walks off; ESTHER watches her go, then looks at the book.*

ESTHER: “Persian Court Protocol”??

NARRATOR: Vashti was right. The King, who was probably a little sorry in his heart to see Vashti go but couldn't admit it, publicly announced that he would be seeking a successor to Vashti's position in the household.

*Newspaper Classified Ad appears on screen (or on sign):*

WANTED: Beautiful, young woman with excellent managerial skills, a talent for interior decorating and catering, and rhythm. Apply in person only at: Office of Human Resources, Palace Complex, Shushan, Persian Empire. EOE.

*MORDECAI enters, reading the newspaper.*

MORDECAI: Hmm. Hmmm. Hmmmmm!

ESTHER: What is it, Dad?

MORDECAI: Esther, dear, I love being called “Dad” by you—but remember in public that I'm just your cousin and guardian, OK?

ESTHER: All right, of course—but what's the news?

MORDECAI: Well, I'll tell you; if I hadn't had my dream last night, I wouldn't think twice about it. The King is looking for a new wife.

ESTHER: (*angrily*) To kick sand in poor Vashti's face, in addition to exiling her? What a dumb, drunken jerk!

MORDECAI: Shhhhhh, honey. I know how much you love Vashti. Normally I wouldn't even mention the King's search, but last night I had a very, very strange dream—and I don't dream very much these days!

ESTHER: (*resigned*) Well, why don't you tell me about it.

MORDECAI (*sings to guitar accompaniment*):

Last night I had the strangest dream  
I ever dreamed before;  
I dreamed the King of Persia said  
he'd put an end to war.  
I dreamed there was a palace room  
and the room was full of men  
and the paper they were signing said  
they'd never kill again.  
And, Esther: you were on the throne  
and the King was smiling round  
and he toasted to your health, and then  
he waltzed with you around.  
And Jews and Medes and Egyptians all  
stood laughing hand in hand,  
and Xerxes, that old drunken fool,  
made peace throughout the land.

ESTHER: Wow, that is ... remarkable. What do you think it means?

MORDECAI: Well, I don't know. But it seems as though your being on the throne is a good thing—in the dream. And it seems as though the King is happy—in the dream. And it seems as though there is peace throughout the land, because of Xerxes and... and *you!* In the dream.

ESTHER: Uh oh.

MORDECAI: So, it would seem to indicate that you should...

ESTHER: Ye----s?

MORDECAI: ... go with your cousin to Shushan to apply for the position!

ESTHER: (*coldly*) Apply for the position.

MORDECAI: Yes! Of the King's New Wife!

ESTHER: You must be out of your mind. (*checks his forehead; thoughtfully*) You don't seem to have a fever.

MORDECAI: (*pulling himself away out of range*) Don't you see, Esther? You are going to save the Jews!

ESTHER: How could I possibly do that? All I will do, if I go to Shushan and apply for this so-called "position," is either 1. be laughed at and turned away; or 2. be accepted and betray my people! Don't you see? Vashti has told me all about how the palace works: you do as you are told; you organize your life around the King, whether or not he calls for you; you eat, sleep, and work the way they say; you don't respect the Sabbath; you eat pork if they want you to! I wouldn't be **able** to be Jewish!

MORDECAI: Estherke, my little Star, I know all this. And yet: it seems to me that there might be ... a bigger picture somehow. That it might be your destiny to go to that palace, and influence the King on behalf of the Jews, in case there is some danger that arises for them, throughout the Persian Empire. Like the King said long ago, I believe that the Persian Empire can embrace all peoples, can tolerate many different religions and customs, and that Jews can be Persians just as much as Zoroastrians, or Greeks, or people of any religion. But not everyone believes this. Not everyone, Esther: not yet! There are people, and God forbid that you meet them but you may, who do not *want* everyone to be a Persian; people who think that God does *not*

have many names, and even that God does not want humans to cooperate with each other—that people fight one another by some law of nature, and that the strongest should win out. I am afraid of people like that—and it seems to me that sometimes even the King might need to be reminded of the need for tolerance, and for thinking the best of others, and giving them the benefit of the doubt.

ESTHER: He certainly needed a reminder when he sent Vashti packing!

MORDECAI: Exactly. Even the King sometimes needs to be reminded of his own ideas. (*pause*) You could remind him.

*Esther looks away, thinking.*

NARRATOR: Esther thought over what Mordecai had said. It was a long shot—she did not believe that she would be chosen for this job, out of so many millions of women who must be applying. And it still bothered her that even if she was chosen, she might not even be able to be fully Jewish at the palace—but she was also aware that things were not going completely well for the Jews, not to mention other groups with strange customs, throughout the Empire, and she hoped that she could make some change through being there, talking with the King, or even his retainers or the other women, sometimes, in off moments. She began to nurture a hope that she might be able to effect some change from within, or at least put a brake on bad developments. So she agreed to go.

*ESTHER says goodbye to MORDECAI, takes her pouch with her and a few books, and walks with a COUSIN toward Shushan. XERXES is waiting for her, and offers her his arm. They walk into the palace together, & he presents her to his courtiers. She is seated on a throne, upstage.*

*MORDECAI walks another route, carrying a big sack, and winds up in front of the gates of the palace, downstage. He sits, takes some items out of his sack, including some wooden utensils, cups, bowls, and a few gragers, and sets them out for sale on the sidewalk.*

MORDECAI: (*talking to himself*) I'm happy that Esther agreed to do

this, but also a little worried: she's my little girl, and if anything goes wrong, I would feel responsible. But I have a plan: I will stay right here at the palace gates, and if she needs anything, I will be able to help her. And who knows? Perhaps she will help us all someday.

*MORDECAI makes a couple of sales; PASSERSBY stop and look at his items, they haggle with their hands and gestures, and then he eventually sells them something. Various GRANDEES enter the palace. HAMAN also enters, wearing a tricorn hat.*

HAMAN: No blocking the gates! No blocking the palace gates!

MORDECAI: (*abashed, apologizing*) Oops! I'm so sorry—let me get this merchandise to the side here. Sorry, sir! Didn't mean to block anything!

HAMAN: Just watch it, old man! (*enters palace*)

MORDECAI: (*quietly*) Manners are not really his strong point, eh?

NARRATOR: Time passed, and Esther, like Vashti before her, was a big hit at the palace. The women liked her, the courtiers liked her, and the King was absolutely smashed on her.

XERXES: Esther! Oh, Esther, my little starling!

ESTHER: Yes, my King?

XERXES: Sweetie, would you come rub my back? I'm so tired out from these long meetings! I miss you all day!

ESTHER: Sure—should I bring the Tiger Balm?

XERXES: Just looking at you is enough to make me feel better, actually. You make me feel like... like I want to give everyone in the world a big present!

NARRATOR: Esther knew that her luck could turn at any moment in the palace; she always remembered Vashti, and how beloved *she* had been of the King before he exiled her. She learned by heart everything

in the Protocol book that Vashti had given her, and watched her steps carefully.

ESTHER: (*thinking*) Well, that's very nice, but I think I'll bring the Tiger Balm as a backup, anyway.

NARRATOR: And Esther told no one that she was Jewish; she was afraid, as Mordecai had been, that, despite all the talk in the palace about tolerance and family, her friends among the women, and even the King himself, might not be able to live up to their ideals when put to the test. This bothered her.

*ESTHER is alone, walking down a tree-lined path at night. Stars are out.*

ESTHER: Honestly, what do I think I'm doing? Here I am, in hiding. Waiting. But for what?

*DREAM VASHTI appears from behind NARRATOR (her child), who looks after her holding out her hand.*

DREAM VASHTI: For the right moment.

ESTHER: The right moment... but what if I don't know it when it comes? What if the right moment has already passed? I should have told them I was Jewish when I first applied for this awful job.

DREAM VASHTI: Well, I can see the advantage in that; it's true—perhaps you should have said something at the start. But what's done is done now: you were afraid, Mordecai was afraid, that they would reject you without even giving you a chance. But that's understandable, in this world we live in.

ESTHER: This world we live in: it's full of hate, isn't it? And prejudice... Where is the world we grew up in? our world, where we learned about each other's lives? our world that was full of love and respect and tolerance and sharing?

DREAM VASHTI: Not everyone shared it, Esther. That world was the one that we created. Now that we are older, we have to share it: but

it's hard to know where to start.

ESTHER: Yes, hard to know *how* to start... As little girls, we started at the beginning. There was no need to start—others started it for us.

DREAM VASHTI: Yes, we were lucky; but as grown women, talking to other grown people, we can't always start at the beginning. Sometimes we have to just jump in in the middle, and start where **they** are. Start teaching them about all the wonderful things we already knew and thought about when we were small.

ESTHER: Why should we do it? Why should we take the risk, when they can do to us what the King did to you? Despite everything you did to make his palace beautiful, and his world better, he did THAT to you!

DREAM VASHTI: Well, I realize now that it wasn't just him. It was how his world worked. But we – you – can make it work better.

ESTHER: What makes you think I can? I don't feel like I can do anything at all about any of this. I can't even light Sabbath candles in this crazy palace world, or eat apple strudel. Or have two New Year's celebrations. Or talk about the stars.

DREAM VASHTI: Well, we created a world, remember? That is a big, big thing, and we did it, just two little girls alone.

ESTHER: We did, didn't we?

DREAM VASHTI: Yes! So start now to share our world – start to save the King's world by helping it to grow. Share what we made, Esther: share it!

ESTHER: But... who am I sharing it *for*? (*sobbing*) I miss you, Vashti!

DREAM VASHTI: You are sharing it for me, Esther, and for yourself, and for everyone who comes after us. For our friends, and for our children, and for our children's children.

ESTHER: (*still sniffing, but trying to get ahold of herself*) But... but I

can't do this alone!

DREAM VASHTI: You won't be alone—I promise!

*In the background, the constellation of the Great Bear and the North Star up in the sky above the woods become brighter as ESTHER and DREAM VASHTI disappear into the trees.*

NARRATOR: Meanwhile, certain people around the palace had their own plans.

*The TWO CONSPIRATORS, are chatting in front of the palace gates. MORDECAI is sitting quietly with his wares in front of him, seemingly asleep.*

CONSPIRATOR 1: I don't know, Teresh: it just pisses me off! How long have we been in the King's service, now?

CONSPIRATOR 2: Eighteen years, Bigthan—not counting the probation period.

CONSPIRATOR 1: Well, why does he trust some girl from God knows where, whom he only just met two and a half years ago, more than he trusts us?

CONSPIRATOR 2: You mean Queen Esther? Aw, he's just infatuated with her. She's a cutie, isn't she?

CONSPIRATOR 1: She's a devil! I'll tell you, I've had enough of all the new fashions she is introducing into the palace—all the talk about candles on Friday nights, and how God has many names, and the Jews and Egyptians and Ethiopians are really Persians... She had the whole women's quarters celebrating Kwanzaa last year! what'll be next, Ramadan? ... it's all dangerous nonsense!

CONSPIRATOR 2: Yeah, that's true: but she bakes a mean apple strudel.

CONSPIRATORS 1 & 2: Mmmmmmm.....

CONSPIRATOR 1: Look, it's not her fault: but this King has to go. He talks too much about brotherhood throughout the realm, and all sorts of other garbage, and look what happens: our immigration laws are in a shambles! his own palace is becoming a comfortable home for foreigners! He's denying his own heritage! He's letting these heathen run the kingdom! I say a little cyanide slipped into one of those precious wine cups of his would be a great thing for the whole Empire.

*MORDECAI does a double-take, looks up at CONSPIRATOR 1, then looks down again, pretending to sleep, but keeps one eye open.*

CONSPIRATOR 2: What do you mean? Kill him?

CONSPIRATOR 1: Well, you don't have to put it quite that bluntly...

CONSPIRATOR 2: Um... how else would you put it, actually?

CONSPIRATOR 1: We could, er, ... help him to his eternal rest.

CONSPIRATOR 2: I'd miss the strudel.

CONSPIRATOR 1: Me too—but sacrifice for the greater good, right?

*The CONSPIRATORS shake hands and move into the palace, leaving MORDECAI alone.*

MORDECAI: *(stands up & looks around, waving arms frantically)*  
Police! Police!!

NARRATOR: As it turned out, Mordecai was able to give his information to the police in time to save the King's life. And this did not go unremembered.

CHIEF OF POLICE: OK, Bert, you got that? Teresh and Bigthan, Conspirators against the King. Confessed; convicted; life without parole. Mordecai the Jew, Informant. 12<sup>th</sup> day of the 1<sup>st</sup> month, Persian Year 9,033. Case closed. Put it in the *Chronicle*, and make sure you use your best penmanship.

BERT: Got it, Boss. Where do these chronicles go?

CHIEF: Oh, into the King's library. Not that he ever looks at 'em. Just write it nice.

NARRATOR: And conspirators were not the only bad influences on the court.

*HAMAN walks through the gate, with ATTENDANTS. He stops to look at Mordecai's wares, picks up a grager and examines it.*

HAMAN: How much for this thing?

MORDECAI: (*Jumps up*) Good morning, Sir! How much? I'll give it to you for ...

HAMAN: (*To ATTENDANTS*) Oh, good: he said he'd "give" it to me! Thanks, Grampa! (*He takes the grager with him, and all begin to exit into the palace; MORDECAI looks after him, then sighs, and sits back down*)

MORDECAI: That young man just has no manners at all.

HAMAN (*overhearing*): Grampa, *you're* the one with no manners, hanging out here at the gate, selling your garbagey little vintage ware; do you think this is some sort of flea market? You've certainly got enough fleas to start one. Get a laptop and an Etsy shop, willya?

MORDECAI (*to himself*): Well, he's certainly clever. I don't like him, though. (*to Haman*) You're not a very nice person, are you?

HAMAN: (*with the air of having won an argument*) Would you rather be nice? or smart? Most folks would choose "smart."

MORDECAI: (*to audience*) He doesn't seem to realize that it's not necessarily an "either/or" situation.

NARRATOR: Haman (*from offstage, we hear HAMAN sound his grager over his own name*) was smart—even if he was not nice. And the King began to notice this, too.

*HAMAN is standing in the wings, listening, and playing with his grager, which he sounds “accidentally” as XERXES says his name, startling himself:*

XERXES: That Haman, he is a clever one, isn't he? Call him in here again—I want to know what he has to say about how to deal with the Abyssinians, Arabians, and Assyrians.

HAMAN: *(entering while still fooling with the grager; thoughtfully)* What a good idea to work on regional policy alphabetically.

XERXES: Thanks! I thought of that on my own!

HAMAN: Well, if you want *my* advice about the Abyssinians, they need a stronger hand. Their main port city is getting way too popular with traders, and their silly nature gods are an abomination! Don't let them feel that they are equal, or they'll start getting uppity, and refusing to send produce to the Shushan markets at a discount! The Persian Empire should not be a servant of the masses, but their master!

XERXES: *(writing it down)* Hmm, you may be right.

HAMAN: And the Arabians and the Assyrians as well: less religious freedom! None of this One God, and Ishtar Goddess of Love and Gilgamesh the Hero and so on. None of this “same god by another name” nonsense. That's just a dodge: they are trying to take over your empire by winning hearts and minds, and that is just not right.

XERXES: *(writes it down)* I see your point.

HAMAN: Those who do not want to fight in this world of eternal struggle do not deserve to live.

XERXES: *(writes it down)* What inspiring maxims you always have!

NARRATOR: You can see where this all was headed...

*A cock crows offstage; morning. HAMAN is coming into the palace*

again, and MORDECAI is sitting before the gates. HAMAN is still playing with his grager. Each time his name is said, he accidentally sounds it.

HAMAN: (to the PEOPLE sitting and standing around the gates) Good morning, gentlemen! (to Mordecai) Get out of my way, dog!

PEOPLE: (variously, bowing and scraping) Morning, my Lord! Top o' the morning to you, my Lord Haman! Howdy, my Lord! Bonjour, my Lord!

MORDECAI: (moving his blanket a bit, but undisturbed) And a good morning to the rude young man!

HAMAN: All right, that's enough out of you! You are getting on my last nerve... What's your name, anyway?

MORDECAI: Mordecai the Jew. What's yours?

HAMAN: (accidentally sounding the grager) Haman the Agagite. But you can call me "my Lord." And bow down when you talk to me! Can't you see I'm a man of importance? (plays with the grager)

MORDECAI: Oh, I couldn't do that: that's for God! Can I just call you (HAMAN accidentally sounds the grager) "Haman the Agagite"?

HAMAN: (impressed; to himself) This thing is loud. (looks up at MORDECAI; obviously did not hear him) Bow down and use "My Lord," you vermin, or you'll regret it.

MORDECAI: Hmm... sorry, just can't, Sir. How is "Sir"?

HAMAN: Not good enough. Too bad for you – and your little dog, too.

MORDECAI: (confused) Dog?

HAMAN exits into the palace in a huff, followed by his PEOPLE, leaving MORDECAI alone.

NARRATOR: Now, Haman (offstage grager) did not know how he

was going to do it, but he was determined to make Mordecai pay obeisance to him. But as chance would have it...

*XERXES and ESTHER are in twin beds next to each other, a nightstand in between. On the wall above it hangs a map of the Persian Empire. ESTHER is reading Architectural Digest.*

XERXES: Oh... What a migraine I have!

ESTHER: Aw, honey, what's wrong? Shall I get the Tiger Balm?

XERXES: Eeeya.... oh, I don't think it's a massage-able one... let me just rest here for a moment...

*Pause. Both XERXES and ESTHER look straight ahead, waiting.*

XERXES: Maybe if you read to me... could you?

ESTHER: *(looking at her mag)* Something about architecture?

XERXES: No... something soothing, mindless...

ESTHER: *(casting a look around the room; she spies the bookshelf and goes over to it)* Hmm... what about the *Chronicles*?

XERXES: That's *exactly* what I need—could you read to me from it, so I can fall asleep?

*ESTHER opens a volume randomly and begins to read, somewhat softly; the NARRATOR speaks over her. ESTHER drones: “And in the year 9,033, on the 2<sup>nd</sup> day of the 1<sup>st</sup> month, news was received at Susa that there was a flood in the northeastern provinces; and a decree was sent out that an Emergency Situation should be declared, and the King within one week sent 150 small boats overland to assist in the rescue effort, 20 large carts of wheat, 35 carts of towels, 15 coordinators from the palace emergency squad, ...”*

NARRATOR: This seemed to help... but the King could not go to sleep.

ESTHER: (*sits down on bed, then lies down; getting very sleepy, inserting yawns here and there; adds the following onto previous reading, once it is done*) ...And in the year 9,033, on the 12<sup>th</sup> day of the 1<sup>st</sup> month, two conspirators against the King, named Teresh and Bigthan, were caught plotting to kill His Highness. The conspirators confessed before a judge, and were convicted, being sentenced to life without parole. The key witness in this case was Mordecai the Jew. Case was closed the same day. ... Huh?

XERXES: (*interested; wide awake, not at all sleepy*) Mordecai the Jew, eh? Wow. I'd forgotten all about that incident—does it say if anything was done to thank this man?

ESTHER: (*waking up enough to realize that this is about MORDECAI; checks anxiously in the Chronicle, flipping pages*) Um, er... Mordecai the Jew, Mordecai the Jew... Well, no! It doesn't seem to record *any* kind of thanks or reward for my D--... *ahem*, for the Informant. ... (*surprised and happy, but can't overcome her sleepiness*) Mmmm... whadda nice guy, too... Mmmm... a real peach...

XERXES: (*suddenly, headache gone, ready for action*) Well, that is not right! (*pulling Daily Planner and pencil out of drawer in nightstand*) So long ago! How will this look to the voters in Azerbaijan? This is obviously a PR catastrophe in the making. Damage control, damage control... OK, I am writing this down for tomorrow morning—I know someone who will be *verrry helpful* in figuring out how to honor someone who has saved the King's life! (*pause, puts away planner*) Odd, my headache's gone! Little star, you are a miracle worker! Esther? Esther?

*During XERXES' speech, ESTHER has quietly lain back on her pillow, and fallen asleep with the volume of Chronicles over her face; she snores.*

NARRATOR: Meanwhile, in a little town on the edge of the woods, very far away from Shushan, the exiled Vashti was becoming my Mom.

*The scene is outdoors and perhaps snowy. A LITTLE GIRL (who is the YOUNG META) is huddled downstage with a blanket over her,*

*trying to sleep in a curled up sitting position for warmth. The wind whirls around her; we hear stormy wind noises. VASHTI enters, looking for wood for her fireplace.*

VASHTI: Oh, my – all the wood is going to be damp, I’m afraid. Still, I think I need a few more of the bigger sticks, if we’re going to stay warm tonight. (*spots YOUNG META*) Eh? What’s this?

*VASHTI walks over to YOUNG META, and kneels down next to her.*

VASHTI: You are frozen! And such a little girl... I wonder what can have happened? Come on--let’s get you to a warm place, get some hot chocolate into you, and see if you can talk...

*VASHTI lifts and carries or leads YOUNG META gently offstage.*

NARRATOR: Back in Shushan, the King called his top advisor in the next day.

*XERXES and HAMAN stroll together.*

XERXES: (*confidentially*) So, let me ask you, hypothetically speaking...

HAMAN: Hypothetical questions—I love ’em!

XERXES: ... Supposing the King were very grateful to a certain person...

HAMAN: A certain person... (*raises eyebrows, “realizes” that the King means him*)

XERXES: ... Yes, for services rendered above and beyond, you know...

HAMAN: (*proudly*) Above and beyond... great services...

XERXES: ... Yes, for heroic service to the King himself...

HAMAN: (*modestly*) Heroic!... yes, I can see that...

XERXES: Yes, say this person had so to speak, er, rescued the King from death... almost... hypothetically speaking...

HAMAN: (*enjoying his mental image of himself*) I can almost picture the man... brave, perceptive, not afraid to speak out if need be...

XERXES: Exactly! That's the kind of man I mean! Now, what kind of reward should he have? What could I possibly give him in return for such services?

HAMAN: (*blushing*) Oh! beyond the sheer reward of having served the King? Gifts? beyond...

XERXES: (*impatiently*) Yes, yes! What would show other citizens of the realm how generously the King requites those who help him?

HAMAN: (*musings*) Show other citizens... hmm... well, it must be done in *public*, whatever it is...

XERXES: Go on!

HAMAN: Public, public... you could give him his own four-horse chariot...

XERXES: For a day, yes...

HAMAN: (*disappointed, but moving on*) ... yes, for a day, of course... and your own charioteer to drive it, *that day*...

XERXES: Very good, very good... (*takes notes in little book*)

HAMAN: And you could give him a little *crown*...

XERXES: (*writing notes*) For the day, yes... good...

HAMAN: (*very disappointed, but moving on*) ... For the *day*... (*brainstorm*) ... and clothe him in royal purple and ermine robes!!...

XERXES: (*writing notes*) Nice fun furs, for the day ... yes, go on!

HAMAN: He could ride in procession through the streets of Shushan... (*hearing the crowd, waving, pantomime*)

XERXES: (*writing notes*) Ah, yes! right through the streets of Little Azerbaijan, in the south quarter...! Brilliant!

HAMAN: (*in his own world*) And the King's crier could walk in front, proclaiming to all the world: "See all ye peoples! *This* is the way the King honors those heroes ... those courageous and dedicated souls who do him good service!"

XERXES: This is perfect! Ah, I *knew* you would be up to this task! (*Gives notebook to Page*) Page, could you run this over to the royal decree-writers to be written out in large format, with illumination? Quickly—the procession will be tomorrow. I've written the name of the honoree out right there, see it? Mordecai the Jew.

HAMAN: (*double take*) Mordecai the...

XERXES: Thank you for your excellent help! This will be just splendid!

HAMAN: (*spluttering*) Yes, just *splendid!* I can't wait!

NARRATOR: And so Mordecai was honored. (*procession sounds from offstage, cheers, "hip hip hooray!" etc.; grager sound when HAMAN's name is mentioned*) And Haman the Agagite was more determined than ever to get rid of Mordecai the Jew, once and for all.

*HAMAN and his wife ZERESH are in the same bedroom used by XERXES and ESTHER, same positions on twin beds, etc.; the only visible difference is that a tricorner hat, handcuffs, a bridle, a mask, and a large Indiana-Jones-style whip are hanging on the wall above the nightstand. The grager sits on the nightstand. ZERESH is reading Mein Kampf.*

HAMAN: Zeresh, honey, I just can't get over it. He's the only one who won't do it. He just thumbs his nose at me—no respect at all! That "Jewish" routine is just a trick and an excuse: he's always despised

me! And now *this... this... travesty of justice!*

ZERESH: Sweetie, you don't deserve that kind of treatment. But what can you do about it, really?

HAMAN: Oh, I don't know. (*miserably*) I have a headache.

ZERESH: Should I get the Tiger Balm and massage you?

HAMAN: Eeeya, — I just don't think it would do any good for this one... What are you reading?

ZERESH: Oh, just another memoir.

HAMAN: Too bad. I wish it were something that could help me get rid of this man for good.

ZERESH: (*looks up & out at audience, raises eyebrows as if having a good idea*)

NARRATOR: (*grager sound on Haman's name*) Having discussed the matter with his wife, Haman decided that at this particular moment in time an indirect approach was indicated.

*XERXES and HAMAN stroll in opposite direction from before.*

XERXES: Well, if the situation is this dire — and I *have* in fact been informed about some minor disturbances in the provinces at times — then I trust you to do what is necessary.

HAMAN: Thank you, Sire: I have been pondering it for practically a year, and have even consulted the oracles.

XERXES: Hmm. So, you can identify this “certain people scattered abroad and dispersed among the peoples,” correct?

HAMAN: Oh, yes, they are quite easily identified. Their laws are different from those of every other people, and they do not keep the King's laws. It would pay to take a very firm stand on this; they must be destroyed. If you grant this simple request, I guarantee you that in

just one day the entire Empire will be rid of ... well, let us say, a pestilence that has befallen the Body Politic!

XERXES: Hmm. Well, will 10,000 silver talents cover expenses?

HAMAN: (*calculating*) Mmm... yes, that should be barely sufficient—with the help of the courageous. If freedom is short of weapons, we must compensate with willpower.

XERXES: Well, my philosophical Agagite, let me give you my signet ring, then; have them draw up your edict for you at the office, and then you can seal it with this—you'll need a bunch of copies, and translations—we're such a diverse Empire these days! Give them a couple of days, though: they're a little slow this time of year. And don't forget time for courier post—that'll take a few months. Better give it close to a year, really...

HAMAN: (*bowing*) Your Highness, you won't be sorry! (*They stop, buy some wine and glasses from the passing WINE MERCHANT, who also provides them with napkins, and sit down to drink together. They remain on stage throughout the following scene.*)

*As the NARRATOR reads the following passage, the decree, in many languages, is shown on the back wall by projection, or carried across the stage on a long paper banner carried by three or four people. Slowly, Jews come from offstage, dressed in sackcloth, looking desperate and weeping; groups of 2 and 3 together wander across the stage. Toward the end of the NARRATOR's passage, MORDECAI appears among them, walks to the gates of the palace, and sits, mourning; his face and clothing has been rubbed with ashes. He groans quietly, and prays/davens. Everyone exits except HAMAN, XERXES, and MORDECAI, finally, and they form a double tableau, and freeze. Up center, in the palace, ESTHER, her WOMEN, and HATHACH, a flamer and her eunuch/messenger, appear.*

NARRATOR: "The King's secretaries were summoned on the 13<sup>th</sup> day of the 1<sup>st</sup> month, and an edict was written to the King's satraps and to the governors over all the provinces and to the princes of all the peoples, to every province in its own script and every people in its own language: it was written in the name of King [Ahasverus =

Xerxes] and sealed with the King's ring. Letters were sent by couriers to all the King's provinces, to destroy, to slay, and to annihilate all Jews, young and old, women and children, in one day, the 13<sup>th</sup> day of the 12<sup>th</sup> month, the month of Adar, and to plunder their goods. A copy of the document was to be issued as a decree in every province by proclamation to all the peoples to be ready for that day. ... And the King and Haman sat down to drink: but the city of Shushan was perplexed. ... And in every province, wherever the King's command and his decree came, there was great mourning among the Jews, with fasting and weeping and lamenting, and most of them lay in sackcloth and ashes."

WOMAN 1: Esther, it's probably nothing to worry about—just that old man who sits at the gate every day and sells that ugly pottery. He's wearing rags now—maybe it's a "statement". *WOMEN laugh.*

ESTHER: (*knows who that is*) Look, I haven't seen a newspaper in ages. I just want to know what's happening right here in my own city! Is that a crime? And send that old man some nice clothes, as a present from the Queen. Here, Hathach—I trust you.

WOMAN 2: Why waste good clothes?

ESTHER: Just do it. *HATHACH bows and goes to MORDECAI with the clothes.*

MORDECAI: Go away. I don't want any new clothes. I just ruined these.

HATHACH: Sweetie, tsk tsk tsk: you are a walking fashion error. Here, let me ...

MORDECAI: (*loudly*) This is on purpose!

HATHACH: Oh! (*thinking again*) Hmm... you mean, you're protesting designer labels? I sympathize; but still, a man should not give up on style just because he is over 40.

MORDECAI: (*quietly*) I am in mourning.

HATHACH: For Armani? (*touching his hair*) Or Aveda for Men?

MORDECAI: For the Jews!

HATHACH: (*suddenly getting a glimmer*) Aaah! OK, OK... sweetie, just tell me a little more; I need information.

*MORDECAI gives him a copy of the decree. HATHACH reads silently.*

HATHACH: (*shocked*) My word.

MORDECAI: Take it to Esther. Please.

HATHACH: Stay right here. I'll be back. (*runs back to ESTHER, hands her decree*) This is news, right?

WOMEN: (*together*) What? Where? What is it?

ESTHER: A decree – that says all Jews are to be killed! (*WOMEN are shocked*) When was this sent out? And it has the King's seal! How? Why? ... (*WOMEN whisper to each other, and the name "Haman" is heard clearly.*)

HATHACH: Well, that explains the old Jew's rags, I'm afraid. Lucky for us no one here in the palace is ... (*ESTHER catches his eye*) ... is... oh, nooooo.... don't tell me, Esther sweetie... (*ESTHER nods slowly*) ... but... but... OMG. (*WOMEN are flustered, and whisper*)

ESTHER: I should be wearing it, too.

HATHACH: Yes, your whole people has become just one big fashion nightmare, haven't they? Look. No one knows. You're here, not there. You're in the palace. You've even eaten some pork sausage on occasion. They will never suspect. Lie low, and act innocent!

ESTHER: I'm sorry, Hathach. I just can't. I can't lie low; I'm not innocent, according to this decree. If I keep silent right now, perhaps God will send someone else to save the Jews—but it will have been *my task*, my moment, that I gave up—this is the moment that I have

been waiting for. This moment, now; and I must act. (*pauses, thinking*) That Agagite is a clever man. But I think I can trap him in his own net. (*deciding*) This isn't going to be easy—I may not survive, in fact—but I'm going to try.

HATHACH: Not survive? What do you mean?

ESTHER: (*consulting the 'Persian Court Protocol' book, which she pulls out of her pocket*) Well, you all know that I've been sleeping here lately—the King just hasn't called for me for a while.

WOMAN 1: Oh, but that doesn't mean he doesn't love you best, Esther!

WOMAN 2: Yes, there isn't any of us he prefers to you!

ESTHER: That's as may be; but on page 63 here, it says that “none may approach the King inside the inner court without being called; all alike are to be put to death,” –unless the King holds out his golden scepter and lets them live. But I need to speak to the King well before the 13<sup>th</sup> of Adar, which is fast approaching, if I am to have a chance at stopping this horrible edict from becoming reality!

WOMAN 1 & WOMAN 2: Put to death??

ESTHER: Yes. There is that risk. I need to think strategically. But I know someone who has faced something similar, and I'm going to ask her advice. Right now. (*Pulls out cell phone, turns on*) First time I've used this. (*Dials VASHTI's number; VASHTI picks up*)

PHONE VASHTI: Esther! I thought you might be calling. Have you heard about this terrible edict?

ESTHER: Oh, *have* I! It's all I can think about right now. It's the doing of that evil man with the tricorn hat!

PHONE VASHTI: Well, we don't have much time. What can I do for you, Esther? It's good to hear your voice!

ESTHER: Yours too, Vashti! Look. Here's what I'm thinking...

*ESTHER moves into corner with phone; WOMEN murmur loudly enough to cover her conversation; we catch only occasional words; finally...*

ESTHER: ... And I want to meet little Meta just as soon as possible!

PHONE VASHTI: You will, honey. Come visit us. We're happy here.

ESTHER: I will! I will. OK, bye bye—wish me good luck! (*Kisses receiver*)

PHONE VASHTI: I wish you the luck of the stars, Little Star! Remember: I and my family and friends will be praying to Ahura Mazda for you!

*ESTHER hangs up, moves into center of WOMEN; HATHACH stands to the side.*

ESTHER: Hathach, I need you to take these words to Mordecai...

*ESTHER pantomimes speaking to HATHACH, giving a message. HATHACH moves down right to MORDECAI to deliver the "message." ESTHER and her WOMEN freeze in place. XERXES and HAMAN remain frozen in place down left.*

MORDECAI: I understand. Gather all the Jews in Shushan. We will fast very publicly for three days—no drinking, no eating. This is for Esther. God bless her and her women, all of them.

HATHACH: Yes. God bless and help you and them.

*JEWS arrive onstage from all parts of Shushan, carrying candles as for a vigil; each settles in one spot on stage. Music: Ana El Na ("Please God Heal Her Now," arr. Sheely), played on guitar; singing and humming to the melody by all, softly. Lights are dim; only the candles and dim shapes can be seen. While the JEWS are arriving, HAMAN and XERXES exit quietly, taking wine etc. MORDECAI and HATHACH both receive candles and take their place with the others. ESTHER and her WOMEN hold candles upstage on the palace walk.*

NARRATOR: For three days and three nights they fasted. Finally, Esther went to see the King.

*Music continues, swells. JEWS, MORDECAI, HATHACH, and WOMEN move to form a large circle. XERXES, wearing crown and holding scepter, takes up position stage left within the circle. ESTHER breaks the circle from stage right, wearing the tiara. They stand looking at one another for as long as 10 seconds. XERXES steps forward, and holds out the scepter; ESTHER steps forward and puts her hand on the top of it and holds it. The two walk one complete circle around with the scepter acting as center spoke. Lights up; music fades. JEWS, MORDECAI, and WOMEN put out their candles, remain standing in circle.*

XERXES: Esther starling! What a surprise—but a happy one!

ESTHER: It may be happy in the end. Let's hope so.

XERXES: What do you mean? What do you need? Ask anything—it's yours!

ESTHER: *(slowly, deliberately)* O King, please come to a banquet that I will prepare for you tonight. And bring your chief advisor, Haman the Agagite *(one of WOMEN sneezes at same time as Esther says Haman's name)*. At the banquet, I shall make my request of you.

XERXES: *(confused, but agreeable)* Well, sure! We can take a little walk afterwards if you like—I'm sorry I've been so caught up in work that I haven't been able to spend time with you for a while... this will be fun! *(tries to get her to smile by giving a silly smile himself)*

ESTHER: *(not smiling)* See you then.

NARRATOR: It was a strange dinner banquet. *(During this scene, the NARRATOR sneaks off stage, to re-enter with VASHTI as META)*

*GUESTS arrive for the banquet, mainly HAMAN, who carries his grager, and his ATTENDANTS, and XERXES. As HAMAN passes by MORDECAI at the gates, he threatens him with the grager.*

*MORDECAI is still in mourning attire, and does not respond. After everyone moves through the gates, they circle around to walk downstage, where ESTHER is setting out the table (on the floor); ALL sit. ESTHER kneels at head of table, and moves around table, pouring wine, dishing out food, etc. Everyone eats & chats.*

XERXES: So, Esther! What did you want to tell me? I'm all ears!

ESTHER: (*warily*) Let's wait until dessert.

XERXES: Whatever you say, starling. (*winks at her*)

*More eating and drinking, and dessert is brought. It is hamentashen. ESTHER presents one ceremonially to HAMAN, who nibbles at it, likes it, and moves the plate over to himself, pushing several into his mouth.*

XERXES: The suspense is killing me!

ESTHER: All right, here goes nothing. O King!

XERXES: Yes, my dove?

ESTHER: (*with great dignity*) Please spare my life and that of my people!

*General confusion. HAMAN, his mouth full of hamentashen, is shocked; looks back and forth at ESTHER and XERXES.*

XERXES: What do you mean, sweetie? Haman, make some sense of this! (*HAMAN chokes on hamentashen during his name*)

ESTHER: Forgive me, but: I am Jewish! I should have told you before...

XERXES: Jewish? Well, what's wrong with that? Good for a multicultural kingdom, right? Right, Haman? (*HAMAN chokes on hamentashen*)

HAMAN: (*makes choking sounds; swallows some hamentashen*)

*quickly, but his mouth is still full*) Er, well, uh... *right!* That's right, nothing is wrong with it! Absolutely nothing!

ESTHER: (*ignoring HAMAN*) So, the decree that went out recently...

XERXES: (*watching HAMAN*) Decree?

HAMAN: (*with mouth full, spluttering*) I didn't know *you* were Jewish, my Queen!

XERXES: WAIT a cotton-picking minute here! What kind of decree did you use my signet ring to send out? Haman? (*HAMAN chokes on hamentasch*) I'm talking to you, so now you answer me!

HAMAN: (*gulping and trying to sneak away somehow*) Uh, decree... um, I, uh... I forgot?

XERXES: Haman! (*HAMAN chokes again during his own name*)

ESTHER: O King: here's a copy. (*Hands over a copy of the decree. XERXES reads it over, looks up incredulously from ESTHER to HAMAN and back, then hands it back to ESTHER.*)

XERXES: Wow. That is the very last time I ever give anyone my signet ring. Guards! Take this man away and hang him like the dog that he is.

*HAMAN throws himself at ESTHER's feet and attempts to hang on; 2 GUARDS of the KING drag him away by his feet, as he screams.*

ESTHER: Honey?

XERXES: What, sweetcakes?

ESTHER: That was a little scary.

XERXES: (*frustrated*) Well, you know, I'm the King and all, and that means I have absolute power of life and death, and he was virtually attacking you just now, and he snuck that decree in under my nose, and... and...

ESTHER: But—you know, it's a show for kids and all—

XERXES: (*looks out at audience*) Oh! Really? Sheesh... um, how can I do this? um... Director? Director? (*looking offstage; then at ESTHER*) He's getting coffee. Uh...

ESTHER: Look, I have an idea. (*whispers in XERXES' ear*)

XERXES: (*gets it*) Done! OK! Rewind!

[HAMAN walks back in backwards, reverses steps until the point where HAMAN falls at ESTHER's feet; then action goes forward; as he is dragged off, XERXES yells: "Just get him outta here! Send him far, far away—how about to Pluto?" USHERS distribute hamentashen to kids in audience.]

ESTHER: That's much better. Thanks.

XERXES: Your wish is my command, my Queen.

ESTHER: So, about that decree... Could you rescind it?

XERXES: Unh-uh, no can do.

ESTHER: What do you mean? I mean, you're the King!

XERXES: Well, it's a little more complicated. I can't reverse a decree that I have signed onto—because that would imply I'd made a mistake, and the King cannot make mistakes. Now, what I *can* do, is issue a counter-decree that says that the people who were to be killed by the former decree are decreed to be obligated by law to defend themselves according to the new decree against the formerly decreed killings. Get it? (*takes a hamentasch*)

ESTHER: (*pause*) That is the dumbest thing I have ever heard in my life. I mean, pardon me, but I'm just speaking truth to power for a second here. Hello? Kings are humans! They are not gods! They make mistakes! They are *fallible*! Now you are telling me that your solution to this mess is *not* to admit that you were wrong, or that

Haman (*KING coughs on hamentasch at HAMAN's name*) abused your signet ring, but that everyone needs to *kill* each other?

XERXES: Well, self-defense... it's not exactly killing each other, is it?

ESTHER: (*beside herself*) You are completely impossible!

XERXES: (*chuckling*) Now, starling, even you have to admit that I am entirely possible!

ESTHER: Aaaaaaugh!

*VASHTI enters with YOUNG META; both are in traveling clothes. They enter through the audience.*

VASHTI: Ahoy there! Anybody home? (*giggles*)

ESTHER: Vashti!! You are *here*! If ever I needed a Girlfriend ex Machina, it's now!

*They run and greet each other; they hug with META between them.*

XERXES: Now, what the heck...?

VASHTI: Oh, you big bully! You stop right there. I'm going home very soon, don't worry—your precious decree about me won't be broken, just bent a little! Esther, dear, is he giving you problems?

ESTHER: Oh, not generally, Vashti! He's been a big teddy bear. But look: what's the best way to get a decree rescinded around here?

VASHTI: Well, there are a couple of points of law ... King, why don't you wait for us for a few minutes? Oh, and could we borrow that signet ring by any chance? (*takes it from a stunned XERXES*) We're just popping over to the office for a few minutes and get a decree sent out there pronto... keep the coffee warm for us.

*ESTHER and VASHTI walk off; ESTHER has put her tiara on META's head; META takes up her position as NARRATOR. XERXES hugs the coffee thermos. ESTHER and VASHTI return with an*

*enormous banner-sized decree, scrolled up.*

VASHTI: Sign here. (*XERXES signs*)

*Music can be heard, very faintly, in background: "We Are Family"; volume increases slowly throughout the last lines of the play. PEOPLE start to dance onto the stage, and into the audience, as the banner is rolled out.*

ESTHER: Is this ... kosher? I mean, we're changing a lot of stuff here...

VASHTI: Esther, do you want my mother to be killed when she obeys that idiotic decree and tries to kill her plumber, who happens to be Jewish, and who also has a decree that tells him to kill her in self-defense?

ESTHER: No, no... you're right! And I don't want my Dad to die, either!

VASHTI: Exactly! I think it's going to do just fine. Our children will come up with something better someday. Right, Meta?

NARRATOR: We'll try!

*Decree is rolled out on large banner that reads, in as many languages as possible: "Thou shalt not kill. No exceptions." Stage is decorated with peace signs, and "Happy Nowruz!" and "Happy Purim!" as well as "Happy 1<sup>st</sup> Day of Spring!" and "Happy St. Patrick's Day," "Happy April Fools Day!", "Happy Black History Month," "Happy Women's History Month," "¡Feliz Cinco de Mayo!", "Happy Spring Solstice!", and so on. As banner is hung prominently, music swells, and PEOPLE bring audience members onto stage to dance. Confetti is thrown, hamentashen are passed out, party decorations reappear, balloons, etc. All PLAYERS onstage singing and dancing.*

*THE END.*