

The Lady and the Tiger

a 10-minute play

by
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CHARACTER NAME	BRIEF DESCRIPTION	AGE	GENDER
PRISONER	desperate, a little conniving, slender	30	M
GUARD	beefy, stoic, strong	mid-20s	M
KING	booming, authoritative voice	60s	M
THE LADY	homely, loud, selfish	20	F

SCENE ONE.

A VOICE COMES over the darkened stage.

KING (OFF STAGE)

Today, Abraham of Halab, having violated the codes of Urukagina, specifically those of civil behavior, expectations of the council of elders, and treatment of women. As punishment for your crimes, you have been brought into this arena to face death.

LIGHTS UP, not too bright, focused on the TWO DOORS stage right, with a beefy GUARD in Mesopotamian armor standing between them, stoically, hands resting on the sword's handle, its blade downward between his feet.

But in the interest of justice, you will get to choose what that punishment shall be. In front of you are two doors, one containing a man-eating tiger which will be released once the door is opened; behind the other, stands the most sought after woman in the kingdom, one of immense beauty and wisdom, willing to submit to all your needs and desires through all your living years. Choose the correct door and your life is yours to keep, with infinite grace and kindness by your side. If you choose wrongly, you will be mauled almost immediately. Now. . . will the prisoner ENTER THE ARENA!

A SECOND LIGHT comes up on the DOOR stage left. A PRISONER bursts out, clearly pushed. He is barefoot and wears leather loin cloth and sleeveless cloth on his torso. He does not want to be there. He turns back to the door he came through.

PRISONER

All right, all right! No need to push. Sheesh! Try some hand lotion, why doncha?

(pauses, takes it all in)

So this is how it ends?

(sees Guard, moves toward center stage)

Front row seats on this, huh? Musta cost you a fortune.

(no response)

Guard with a sense of humor? Check. . . What's your name?

(no response)

Oh, I get it, the VOW. . . OF. . . SILENCE. Or is it an oath? No worries.

Hey, I'm on your side here. I won't make you betray the trust they have in you. No sense in both of us getting punished.

(then)

Here's the thing though: I shouldn't be here. This is all a big misunderstanding. See, the King thinks I shunned his daughter.

KING (OFF STAGE)

What was that?

PRISONER

Nothing. Nothing at all.

(leans in toward guard)

There was no shun, I assure you. I am not the type of guy who shuns people. I can't even get out of a conversation at a party. I end up standing there holding my drink until people have to go pee. Then someone else I don't want to talk to comes over and I'm stuck again. "Too nice," my friends tell me. So certainly, I would never offend the King's daughter. . . We were just friends. I guess she thought we were something more. She was just a little confused, that's all. I can't fault her for that. Besides, we live in a patriarchal society. If I had done what I'm accused of doing to any other woman, do you think I'd be here? No. And that's why I should not be here. . . in this predicament . . . today.

(no response, shrugs)

So since we've settled that, if you'll forgive me for taking my leave so abruptly, I'm just gonna be on my way.

(turns to go, the guard brandishes his sword
in front of him)

On second thought, I can stay a little longer.

(then)

You set up the doors, huh? You know which is behind which door. Any chance I can get you to tell me where the tiger is?

(waits, no response)

Right.

(notices footwear, overly complimentary)

Hey, nice footwear. You get those at the Nineveh Marketplace down by the village? I know the vendor, Osamri. We were in Neolithic Revolution class together. Yeah, just drop my name and he'll give you 20% off your order next time.

(a beat, snaps fingers)

Now, I remember how I know you. You're from Al Basrah. Me too! My parents used to take me and my sister there in the summers. We played on the banks of the Eurphrates. You had the cave down the hill from us, right? We're practically brothers! Oh, what a small world! We really do need to catch up. Would you like that? We'll go back to this outdoor cafe I love and reminisce over those good times. First round's on me.

(delicately)

Right after. . . you tell me the tiger is behind the. . .?

(leans into it for the Guard to answer, gets
nothing, to audience)

Tough nut to crack, this one.

(looks around)

Pretty good turnout today. I would have thought more people would be squeamish at seeing...

(gulps)

My blood and guts spilled throughout the arena.

(the seriousness of the situation sinks in)

This is barbaric. You gotta help me. You don't even have to let on. Just between you and me. Just slip me a little hint so they don't know. Sound good?

(the Guard scratches his nose with his right
hand)

What was that?! Was that it? Your right hand? It's the right door, is that it?

(the guard sneezes)

Or you were just scratching? Ugh! You can't even tell me that much?

(gets angry)

Fine. Let me choose wrong. Let this be on your head. Could you live with yourself?

(struggles to come up with something)

Let the image of me being ripped apart from the inside by a tiger be forever engrained in your memory. . . On second thought, let's not think about that.

(then)

I have kids, you know. . . Well, not my own. They're my sister's, but a couple of boys are gonna be absolutely crushed when their uncle is not around to play Gladiators and the Lion with them.

(leans in)

I'm always the lion.

(scans the crowd)

Look, they're right up there with my parents.

(he waves to the crowd)

KING (OFF STAGE)

No waving!

PRISONER

Sorry. Sorry!

(to Guard)

You enjoy working for that guy? Must pay well, huh?

(thinks)

Oooooo, ooooo, I have money. Yes! I'm a very successful stone carver. Well, up-and-coming. I've been building my business -- networking, reinvesting capital into marketing. Perhaps you've seen some of my work. Around the palace.

(then)

Could you use a little extra cash? I'll give you whatever I can.

(the GUARD shrugs)

Partners! I'll give you 30% of everything I make. You'd like 25%, wouldn't you? So do we have a deal at 20%? Oooof, you are a tough negotiator, I'm telling you. Anyone else would've settled for 10, but I'm in to you for the full 20% of half what I make, right? . . . All you have to do now is tell me which door the tiger is behind.

(no response, disappointed)

That's how I met her actually, the Princess. Well, she met me. She would throw chunks of ivory out of her window to get my attention while I was working. Her way of "flirting." One time -- BOFF! -- took a chunk right off the noggin. I woke up in her chambers. I'm not entirely sure nothing happened either. But I'm not complaining about that. I'm not gonna make that claim against someone with a full-time executioner on staff.

(then)

But she was nice at first. Passionate, too. A little kinky for my taste, but nothing too bad. But she would NOT. . . STOP. . . CALLING. She didn't have anything else going on. I suggested she keep her options open. Y'know, see other people. But I was all she wanted.

She called me her “Bloody Boo Boo,” I guess from the wound she gave me.

(shudders)

She would wait outside my home when I got back from work. Oh, and she only talks about two subjects: how big her palace is and her hobby. You know what her hobby is? Tooth sculpture! She takes teeth from dead animals and puts them into sculptures. It’s disgusting! She doesn’t even clean the teeth before putting them together. And I’ll be damned if I could tell you what the sculptures are supposed to be.

(takes a breath)

I mean, it would be nice to be a prince, but I had to weigh my options there. What good is being a prince if you’re not happy? Is it really freedom when every day you’re bound to remain faithful to something you don’t love.

(acquiesces)

Okay, maybe I could have handled it better. I said I’d call her and I didn’t. Was I wrong? Yes. But really, is it that wrong? Have you ever peeled off a wet bandage slowly and it’s stuck to your skin? That’s what I did. I ripped it off. Quick and painless. Otherwise I would have let my feelings fester inside me and I would have become bitter and angry at everyone. I would have started taking it out on her. Little things at first like blaming her for pulling the covers off me at night and then building to the way she chews her food and then just her breathing annoyed me. Eventually I would be insulting her straight out and that’d be a bad environment for our kids. Oh, God! Think of the children.

KING (OFF STAGE)

What is the hold up?!

PRISONER

(snaps back to him in response)

Tough choice here, King!

(to Guard)

See what I mean? Can you imagine that guy as your father-in-law? Nag, nag, nag.

(the filter comes off)

As long as we’re being honest here, she’s pretty homely too. She has one droopy eye and the other follows you wherever you go, without seeming to move at all. Not to mention a mole on her cheek you can’t take your eyes off. It wouldn’t be so bad, but there’s a hair growing out of it that you just wanna pluck and be done with it. And don’t even get me started on her voice. It’s a combination of a sword scraping across a rock and an gazelle being ripped apart by a cheetah.

(The Guard can't help but let a smile slip
out)

A-ha! You've seen her! So you know I'm not crazy. C'mon, can't you put yourself in my sandals?

(then)

So it didn't work out. So what? She'll find someone else. I tried to set her up with my friend who's near-sighted and into weird stuff, but he died last week building the temples. We're all meant to be with someone special, don't you agree? It makes the world a better place. When you have that connection, everyone in your world, everyone around you is happier. What if my soulmate is behind one of these doors? You'd be preventing the world from being a better place. The happiness we would have together is contagious. The King said she was the most beautiful woman in the world. I must admit, I'd settle for just someone who was a homebody with a cute face and good sense of humor, but I'll take anyone over the tiger, right? . . . Is she a blond? I'm into blondes which makes it tough to find my perfect match here in Mesopotamia. But I'm not picky.

(desperation building, bows his head)

Please, brother.

GUARD

(nods his head to speak without being seen)

What children?

PRISONER

(a moment of hope)

Huh?

GUARD

You mentioned children before. What children?

PRISONER

(tries to recall, reviews conversation)

Uh, beach, my nephews, stone carving. . . ah! Yes, the children! Yes, well, if you have parents that don't love each other, it just makes it difficult on many families and then the kids grow up with a chip on their shoulders, all angry and bitter because they were not a part of a happy home. So all this angst would fall on the children, the poor creatures. They don't deserve it. Especially little Ibrahim.

GUARD

I thought you didn't have any children.

PRISONER

Not now, but someday. It's never too early to pick out names.

GUARD

(considers this, acquiesces softly)

Okay.

PRISONER

What?

GUARD

(turns slightly, covers mouth)

I will tell you where the tiger is.

PRISONER

Oh, my God! You will? That's -- that's great!

(the Guard shakes his head slightly)

Oh, you won't be sorry! As the Jews say, you're doing a mitzvah. They're not hated yet, right? . . . So I have your word?

(the Guard nods slightly)

Excellent! Here's what I need from you: real subtle now, blink once if the tiger's on the left door or twice it's the right door.

(guard blinks once; prisoner lets out a sigh of relief)

Okay, the left, great!

(guard blinks again)

Wait, what was that? Was that a confirmation blink or part of the same blink? What are you saying?

GUARD

(through his teeth)

Sorry, got desert sand in my eye.

(the guard opens his eyes wider and then blinks once very deliberately)

Gotcha. So the tiger is on the left. Wait, my left or your left?

(the guard rolls his eyes)

PRISONER

All right. My left, my left. Here goes.

(he steps toward the door on the left, to himself)

Oh, I pray I'm not being punked.

(takes a deep breath)

Open. . . The door on the left!

(he flinches as it opens and then. . .)

The LADY comes out. We know right away from the Prisoner's description that it's. . . the Princess!!! She is as he says. In fact, his description of her voice may have been kind.

THE LADY

Bloody Boo Boo!!!

(babbling)

Oh, what a relief! I was so worried that you were going to choose the tiger, but I arranged to have your teeth saved for me in that case, so I would have had a piece of you forever in my sculpture room regardless, but now I have all of you, forever. We'll go back to the palace. . . You should see what I did to my chamber. I added some new furniture for when we're feeling "experimental." There's this book I have been reading with suggestions on positions that I want to try out.

He's stunned. She has her arm through his as she leads him back across the stage toward the entrance he came through. As she talks, the prisoner looks back to the guard, for any help, pleadingly.

PRISONER

I made a mistake. I choose the other door!! Release the tiger! I'm begging you. Please!!

(the guard shrugs as if to say "oops, sorry")

MOMMY!!!