

[Excerpt from Scene One]

[Curtains open. On stage are two tables with a long bench at each, one with a sign on it that reads “Babylonian,” the other with a sign reading “Hebrew.” At the Babylonian table sit Melzar, Rashnu, Mordad, and Fahima, and at the Hebrew table are Ephraim, Tirzah, and Atarah (all facing the audience). They have just eaten a meal. The food is nearly gone, but a few people are still finishing off pieces of meat and glasses of grape juice.]

Ephraim: *[in the midst of a conversation with the two women]* Well, you have to admit, they’re feeding us well.

Tirzah: *[uncomfortable]* They practically wine and dine us, you mean, every single day. It makes me feel almost guilty.

Ephraim: Why? It’s great!

Tirzah: It seems so...indulgent. *[looking at her plate and glass]* It feels wrong, to be treated like guests of honor when we’re captives.

Atarah: But we *are* nobility. At least, we were in Israel. I think it’s only right that we’re treated well.

Ephraim: Exactly. And, come on, they’re training us in all their history and science, so that we can eventually become some of the king’s counselors. Of course they’re treating us well!

Tirzah: *[sighing]* I don’t know. Maybe you’re right.

Atarah: *[wanting to change the subject]* Say, do either of you know what’s going on with Daniel and Hananiah and the others?

Ephraim: *[nodding]* Mishael and Azariah?

Tirzah: Yeah, why aren’t they eating with us anymore?

Atarah: I’m not sure. It seems odd.

Ephraim: Have they said anything?

Atarah: Not to me. I wonder if they’re being punished for something—but that seems unlikely.

Tirzah: Yeah, I’d be shocked if that were true. We should ask them when we see them tomorrow in session.

Ephraim: Oh hey! Speaking of session, did you hear what Koresh did this morning?

Atarah: *[intrigued]* No, what? *[Ephraim lowers his voice and begins narrating eagerly. The three Hebrews continue talking quietly, as attention shifts to the Babylonian table.]*

Rashnu: Melzar, tell them what you were telling me the other day, *[scornfully]* about those Hebrews who wanted, like, watercress instead of pork to eat. *[glances around the table, says to himself]* Wish Imran were here—he should hear this too.

Melzar: Yeah, it’s the strangest thing! One of the Hebrews came up to me about a week ago and said that he and a couple of his friends couldn’t eat the meat I gave them all *[nodding toward the Hebrews]*. Good meat, like we eat! It’s the King’s orders, you know, to nourish the Hebrews well, the ones that were royal in their own land and well-educated.... He wants to train them and make

them his attendants. Anyway, this one—Belteshazzar’s his name—said he would be “defiled” if he ate the meat or drank the wine I gave him. He said—get this—his god didn’t want him to.

Fahima: What is that supposed to mean? Which god?

Melzar: *[shrugs]* I don’t know. I told him it was the Kung’s orders and I didn’t think I should make exceptions. But he said that he and his friends—three others, he mentioned—would be just as healthy as everyone else if they ate pulse and drank water.

Mordad: *[scornful]* Pulse?

Melzar: You know, lentils, beans, chickpeas—

Mordad: *[rolls eyes, interrupting]* I know what pulse is.

Fahima: *[baffled]* What are they, vegans?

Melzar: Don’t ask me. Anyway, I was a little nervous making exceptions, but Belteshazzar asked if they could try it for ten days, and if they looked any worse for their, uh, change of cuisine, I could put them back on the meat and wine.

Mordad: So you agreed?

Melzar: Yeah, I let them try it.

Fahima: How long has it been?

Melzar: Today’s the tenth day.

Rashnu: How are they doing?

Melzar: That’s the crazy thing. *[glances around him warily, then leans in toward others]* They look healthier than ever! Stronger, fresher.... I thought they’d wither up and blow away, you know, but no, not at all! *[A bell tolls in the distance, and Melzar glances over at the Hebrews, who all look up, hearing the bell.]*

Rashnu: And I hear through the grapevine that these four guys are doing amazing work under the language masters and all the other teachers. People say they’re the best of the whole lot from Israel, by a long shot. *[Ephraim, Tirzah, and Atarah start getting up from their table, picking up their plates and glasses.]*

Mordad: *[grudgingly]* I’ve heard that too, from some of our colleagues. It’s uncanny. *[sighs bitterly]* Belteshazzar, Meshach, Abednego, and Shadrach, yes?

Melzar: That’s them. *[The three Hebrews move away from their table, taking their dishes with them and talking among themselves a little, and they exit from the stage. Melzar looks over at the abandoned table.]* They should be here any minute for their meal. They eat after the others are done. *[calls]* Lamis! *[Lamis enters from one side and bows.]* You have the food prepared for the four Hebrews?

Lamis: Yes, sir.

Melzar: Good, bring it in.

Lamis: Right away, sir. *[bows and exits]*

Mordad: *[sitting back from the table]* I think that’s it for me. The king will want us in Council before long, and I need to do some work in the libraries first.

Fahima: I'll go with you. I'm finished too. *[Lamis enters carrying a tray with four dishes of beans, glasses of water, and spoons.]*

Mordad: *[stands up, glancing over at the meal Lamis is beginning to set out on the Hebrew table]* Anyway, I don't really want to be here when they eat. I don't think I could stomach it. *[Fahima and Rashnu both follow suit and stand up from the table]*

Rashnu: *[shudders, looking at the food]* Yeah, pulse is enough to make anyone gag.

Mordad: *[annoyed]* Not the food, Rashnu, *them*. Oh, the nerve of those Hebrews—mere captives, slaves!—and they refuse the king's meat and wine!

Fahima: It does seem kind of...ungrateful.

Mordad: Pure insolence! They think they can do whatever they want just because they had power in Israel and now they're being trained to serve the king. Upstarts! *[Lamis exits with her empty tray.]*

Melzar: *[shrugs]* Well, they do always seem to be right, about everything. *[stands up, having been the last to finish his food]* I mean, they thrive on stale peas and practically speak our language better than we do. It's like they're—invincible.

Mordad: *[walking away from the table, followed by Fahima and Rashnu]* We'll see about that. *[All three exit.]*

Melzar: *[looks after his friends for a moment, then ambles over to the Hebrew table and turns around the "Hebrew" sign, revealing the word "Kosher" on the other side]* Well, I think they're alright, whatever Mordad says. They're strange, for sure—maybe a little crazy, even—but...they're good, I think. *[leans down and sniffs the food, grimaces]* Ech. *[Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah enter, laughing and talking together warmly.]*

Azariah: Did you see Baruch's face when he said that?

Hananiah: He could not have been more shocked!

Daniel: *[seeing Melzar]* Melzar, sir, good day! *[All four bow their heads slightly to Melzar.]*

Melzar: Your, uh...nourishment is ready for you.

Mishael: Thank you, sir!

Melzar: I have to admit, you four are looking stronger than ever. *[Lamis enters.]*

Hananiah: *[looking at the others]* We feel that we are.

Lamis: *[bowing to Melzar]* Sir, his highness has sent word that he would see you in his chambers at once. He wishes to speak with you *[glances at the four men, with slight disdain]* concerning the Hebrews under your supervision.

Melzar: I'll go right away then. You can clean off our table now. *[indicating Babylonian table]*

Lamis: Yes, sir. *[bows and exits]*

Melzar: *[to the four men]* Well, sit down and enjoy your...edibles—I assume they're edible—and I'll return soon to see you get back to work on time.

Hananiah: Yes, sir. *[The four sit down at the "Kosher" table as Melzar exits. Lamis reenters with an empty tray and works to clear off the Babylonian table while the Hebrews converse.]*

Mishael: *[glancing to make sure Melzar has left]* Daniel, do you think he's going to make us go back to their food?

Daniel: *[thoughtfully]* No, I don't think so. He seems like a reasonable man—I think he'll let us eat what we believe we should, since he can see we're healthier because of it.

Azariah: *[looking eagerly at his food, with his hands folded]* Good. Can we say the blessing?

Daniel: *[grinning]* Sure. *[All four close their eyes.]* Lord, we bless Your name and we give thanks for the strength You give us daily—for this physical food You've provided for us, and for the spiritual strength we always find in Your presence. We thank You for Your protection in this foreign land, and we trust that You will continue to watch over us, however You see fit. May our lives bless those around us: our friends as well as our enemies. Give us courage, Lord. Amen.

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End of script preview.