

## *Vashti to the Rescue*

by Sonia Zylberberg

Vashti leaned back into the shadows, making sure her cloak covered her completely. Since fleeing for her life, she had perfected the art of invisibility, of wandering through towns and countrysides without calling attention to herself. Just another nameless woman. Tonight she was on more dangerous ground: she had returned to the palace itself, where the guards were more numerous and more vigilant, and might even recognize her.

She had to come. She had made a vow that awful night that, if she survived, she would look out for her successor, she would use the knowledge she had amassed during her ten years as queen to try and help the next victim. So here she was, risking her freedom for Esther.

The poor silly girl! She'd no idea what she was getting into. And that cousin of hers – what was he thinking – insulting Haman like that! The king's prime minister was not a man to be disrespected, especially in public. Haman took himself very seriously and would never forget or forgive any trace of insult.

Vashti waited patiently until the last servants and guards had withdrawn, then slipped into the queen's chambers, into the room that had once been hers. Shaking herself to quell the memories, the rage – no time for that – she looked down at the lovely young queen. Covering Esther's mouth to keep any startled cry from escaping, Vashti gently shook the younger woman's shoulder.

Esther's eyes opened so quickly Vashti thought she might have been feigning sleep. Perhaps the young queen was no longer quite so naive? She made no sound at all, but her eyes widened in surprise when she saw a cloaked stranger, not a servant. She nodded as Vashti indicated the need for silence and, when the hand covering her mouth was removed, whispered: "Who are you? What are you doing here?"

"Does the name Vashti mean anything to you?" The sharp intake of breath gave her the answer. "Well, never mind what they've told you. Most of it isn't true and we've not time for that right now. I'm here to help you."

"Wha..wh...why?" Esther started to stammer.

"I'll explain later. But you're in trouble!" Esther nodded: "I know. But Mordecai has a plan."

Vashti shook her head firmly: "That man has no sense. He got you into this and listening to him will get you all killed. You need a *good* plan!"

A faint sound from the hall made them both jump. "It's not safe here," Vashti whispered, her mouth an inch from Esther's ear. "There are eyes and ears everywhere. I must go – the palace is waking up. But I'll be back. In the meantime, make sure that cousin of yours doesn't do anything, anything at all!" She opened the door, pausing for a moment to make sure there was no one on the other side and then, as quietly as she had come, was gone.

Esther blinked, thinking she could have imagined the whole thing, so rapidly and completely had Vashti vanished. Yet she felt better than she had for a long time, less alone, less afraid. The

weight of her people no longer rested on her shoulders alone. If nothing else, Vashti's visit made her feel like she had a friend, an ally, someone to help her. She thought about what they had told her about the former queen – “ball breaker” was one of the more polite descriptions. No one ever explained what had become of Vashti – they just got a wise look on their face and nodded knowingly, implying a very bad end. The same one that awaited Esther if she did not *watch her step*. The cautionary non-tale had helped reduce Esther to the state of fear in which Vashti found her.

Mordecai's encounter with Haman had not helped at all. Esther was used to listening to Mordecai and accepting whatever he said: he had been her guardian for so many years, since her parents died. But lately she had begun to wonder whether it was such a good idea to just follow along behind him. Take this queen thing for example. He had insisted it was a good idea – for her, for him, for all their people, even for the old king, who would get a lovely young queen (her!). In other words, a win-win-win situation all around.

Not true. Now she had no friends, no one to talk to, she was afraid all the time, and the king was a drunken old fool. She was sure he had no idea who she was half the time, just a female body in his bed. He had even called her Vashti once or twice – it seemed the only one he could remember was the one that got away!

The next night was her turn with the king; the other nights were for his other “wives” – the women who had lost the beauty contest but did the same job as her, without the title. Because she was the official queen, she had the honour of enjoying the king's company twice as often as

the others. They, none of them, were allowed to speak to the king without invitation. This rule had been strictly enforced since the Vashti episode.

The night after, back in her own bed, she waited eagerly. Vashti did not appear. Nor the night after. Esther began to despair – Mordecai was beginning to pressure her to act as the date set to kill the Jews drew near. She didn't know how much longer she could put him off.

A week later, when Vashti finally returned, Esther was so relieved she threw her arms around the older woman's neck and fell on her, kissing her cheek repeatedly, and crying "Thank you thank you thank you." Vashti disengaged her arms, smiling gently at the enthusiasm: "I haven't done anything, don't thank me yet." "But you're here, you came back, I'm not alone." "No," Vashti said soberly, "that is the worst of what they do to you here. But no, you are *not* alone."

They got down to business quickly. Vashti had come with a plan.

"The first part," she began, "is to rescue Mordecai before he is killed."

At Esther's blank look, she continued: "It seems he has managed to offend Haman again! And this time Haman is out for his blood." Esther looked at her in amazement. Vashti answered the unspoken question, "We know what's going on throughout the country. We're not that powerful yet, but we have resistance cells all over. That's not important now, what's important is saving Mordecai. In a strange way, we owe him. Remember when he exposed the assassins? They were ours, a rogue cell that grew impatient and was moving too fast and would have gotten us all killed. When Mordecai overheard the plot and denounced them, he saved us. And,

here's the thing, he put Ahasuerus in his debt. The king. Who loves loyalty, but has a short memory. We just have to find a way to remind him."

At this, Esther looked up, struck by an idea: "Is it in that book? the big fat red one?"

Vashti nodded: "I imagine so – I think he has everything recorded in that book. Why? Do you have an idea?"

Esther blushed, she was not used to being listened to. "It's just that he's been having trouble sleeping lately – his gout has gotten much worse – and he often has the Palace Lector read to him from the book, it distracts him and eventually puts him to sleep."

Vashti stood up and started pacing in her excitement: "That's a great idea! We just have to set it at the right page!" Esther interrupted her gleefully, almost forgetting to whisper: "I can do that!" To Vashti's "You can read!?" Esther nodded vigorously, swelling with pride, "My cousin taught me."

Even as she felt envious, Vashti saw how this solved one problem: "Yes! Well that takes care of Mordecai, but the edict against the Jews is trickier and much more dangerous. My co-resisters and I have been discussing it all week and we've finally come up with a plan that I think will work. It requires some acting on your part." She looked at Esther questioningly and the queen nodded with her new-born confidence.

“We’ll use Mordecai’s idea of confronting the king, but we need time to coach you, much more time than we’d ever have here.” She gestured towards the hall and the sounds of the palace stirring. “The only place where they will leave you alone is in the temple. Tell them you want to go on a spiritual retreat for three days of uninterrupted fasting and prayer. We’ll take the place of the temple priestesses so we will have those three days to work with you and get you ready. Can you do that?”

“Yes,” Esther whispered. The idea of spending three days in the company of Vashti and her co-resisters, after so long with no one at all to talk to or be with, was almost more than she could bear.

“I know,” Vashti murmured. “I know, I’ve been there too.” As the sounds grew louder, she stood up abruptly. “I have to go. Try and do this as soon as possible – we haven’t got much time.” And she was gone.

Esther managed to put the first plan into action that very day. Pretending to search for a lost earring, she wandered into the king’s sleeping chamber and set the red book to the page that recounted Mordecai’s denunciation of the two traitors. Hopeful that she had done what she could to save her cousin, she quickly moved to the next step. She informed her co-wives that she was feeling depleted and felt the need to replenish her spiritual energy. Helena, the king’s second-wife, agreed to act as queen if any official need arose. If anyone asked, she would mumble the magic words “women’s stuff”, guaranteed to cut short any further discussion. Two

days later, Esther left the palace. The king's guards escorted her to the door of the temple and delivered her into the care of the high priestess, promising to return in three days.

Esther had been to the temple before – during the year of training, the contestants had spent several days here, praying to win. She had thought of it as a cold and unfriendly place, not at all like the small, cozy house where she went to pray to the Hebrew God. This time, though, it seemed like an oasis of warmth and hope. The dark was a friend, a cloak for plans which required secrecy.

In the inner sanctum of the temple, Vashti was waiting with seven other women. Over the course of the next three days, they trained her in assertiveness and self-defense; to use her beauty as a weapon and to use more deadly force when feminine wiles were not enough; to mask her emotions and her thoughts; to project what she wanted people to see. How to use her looks, her beauty, to distract people, to direct their gaze where she wanted. How to modulate her voice to influence them. All the lessons focused most especially on the person of King Ahasuerus and how to get him to do what she wanted. They transformed the meek obedient girl into a confident and powerful woman.

Esther had always been an open and friendly person – she had believed in people, believed what they said, and responded in kind. But she changed quickly once she grasped the essentials of deviousness and guile. At the end of three days, the resistance-priestesses gathered round and pronounced her ready.

Vashti saluted the queen, saying, "You are now a graduate of the school of artifice." Esther laughed with the others, her confidence stemming, in part, from their presence. Vashti sobered the atmosphere: "We'll be watching. If need be, we'll try to help. Hold that close to you if you become afraid. But we can't act for you, this is yours. Have courage."

Esther bowed her head. She faltered for a moment. Her self-assurance ebbed and she grabbed for Vashti's arm. Then, as they heard the King's Guard approaching, she closed her eyes, swallowed, opened her eyes and stepped back. Gathering her cloak around her, she turned to greet the guard come to take her home.

Upon her return, she lost no time. Her next official night with the king would not come soon enough – by then the appointed day would have passed and the Jews would be dead. She would have to force an audience. In his official chambers. A much more dangerous place for her to open her mouth unbidden than in his bed, where she at least had the advantage of having satisfied him.

She went first to her own chambers. Even as she told her handmaid to run a bath, she was picking out the dress and jewelry she would wear: the most becoming and revealing dress, the most dazzling of the jewels. She knew the first impression had to be perfect, that there would be no second chance. When she was bathed, anointed, dressed and bejeweled, she went to the king's receiving chamber.

It was a room that she had been told to never, under any circumstances, enter uninvited. Esther did not hesitate. Waving the guards aside, she entered the chamber with her head held high



and approached the king. She fell to her knees, at his knees, every movement calculated to direct his gaze to her lightly veiled breasts. When she felt him enthralled, she next chose coyness from her arsenal. Smiling up at him, head bowed, eyes raised, bosom heaving, she breathed: "My lord, I hope you are not angry with me for coming to you?" He hesitated. She continued in the same dulcet tones, "I missed you – I hoped to convince you to come and see me soon."

By now, the courtiers had averted their eyes, so as not to be caught staring at her breasts, which were beautiful but not worth dying for. Ahasuerus had no such problem – he feasted his eyes, cleared his throat, and exhaled a desire-saturated "Ahhh..." as he stretched his sceptre towards her.

"Perhaps you would like me to prepare a banquet in your honour?" she continued.

His face flushed even more deeply at the thought of a feast of food to accompany . . . the rest . . .  
.. "I would like that very much."

She turned suddenly to Haman, who was hovering behind her, trying to protect the purity of his eyes from this lascivious performance. He may have been pompous, but he was not a fool: he recognized competition. "And perhaps the prime minister would care to join us?" she smiled winningly. The prime minister, conceding her momentary advantage, could only nod.

"Wonderful," she cooed, "I will expect you both tomorrow night." And she turned and floated out of the royal presence.

She managed to sustain the lighter-than-air display of confidence until she reached her own chamber, where she spent the next hour shaking convulsively as the fear she had repressed overtook her. She practiced what she had learned, the breathing and the visualizations, and eventually she managed to calm down enough to realize that she had done it! She had risked her life and survived! The plan was working!

At the feast , Esther regaled the king and Haman with the finest foods and wines. She had invited Helena as well, and her co-wife, excited to be included in this prestigious and precedent-setting event, sat at Haman’s side and kept him well-flattered. When the meal was almost finished, Esther sat down next to Ahasuerus and, trembling, burst into tears.

This was a dangerous move. Ahasuerus did not like tears. But he had eaten well, he had drunk well, and was well-disposed towards his lovely host. “Whatever is the matter, my dear?” he inquired magnanimously. “Your Majesty,” she sobbed, “please spare me my life.”

He sputtered: “Whatever do you mean? Who would harm my beautiful queen?”

“I have been sold, together with my people, sold to be destroyed, to be massacred. If we had only been sold into slavery, I would never have disturbed you with this, but he will have us completely exterminated.”

“Who is he? Where is he, the man who has ordered such a thing? Who would dare to do this to my queen? Who would betray me!”

Esther turned and pointed at Haman: “There he is – the adversary and enemy is Haman!”

Bellowing for his guards, the enraged king charged from the room. In desperation, Haman turned to beg Esther for his life. He knelt at her feet and kissed the ground in front of her couch, pleading for mercy. The king returned as Haman was getting to his feet, still inches away from the queen as she reclined on the couch. Seeing this, Ahasuerus flew into an even greater rage: “Is it not enough that he betrays me? He is going to attack my queen as well? Molest my queen in my own palace! Usurp me!”

There could be no mercy. Haman was hanged from the very pole he had so deviously prepared for Mordecai. Ahasuerus gave the Jews the right to defend themselves, which allowed them to avert the disaster Haman had tried to set in motion. Instead of being exterminated, they seized their liberation; the 13th of Adar became a day of joyous celebration.

Esther decided she’d had enough of palace life and enough of Mordecai. Leaving a grateful Helena to take her place as first wife to the king, she climbed onto the mule, behind Vashti, and they rode off together, into the new moon.