The Story of Queen Esther
(Based on the Book of Esther)

Once upon a time, there was a little girl named Esther. She was sweet and beautiful and very, very smart. She had an uncanny ability to reflect on problems and come up with clever solutions. Unfortunately, Esther's parents had died when she was young, so she was an orphan. She was raised by her cousin, Mordecai {MOR-duh-kie}, who loved her like his own daughter.

Esther and Mordecai lived in the realm of King Ahasuerus {ah-huh-SWEAR-us}. He was a powerful, but somewhat silly, king. One of his faults was that he was easily persuaded by other people. He often ended up doing things at the suggestion of others without thinking them through. For example, one night, he called to his queen, Vashti. For some reason, she didn't come. This angered King Ahasuerus so, on the advice of his sages, he enacted a new law stating that every man should be treated as supreme master in his own household. The king's advisers also decided that King Ahasuerus needed a new, younger, more obedient wife. Of course, King Ahasuerus went along with that idea, too.

When the word got out that the king was seeking a new queen, all the fair young maidens – and some who were not so fair – traveled from far and wide to be considered. As you might imagine, since this is the story of Queen Esther, it was the beautiful and enchanting Esther who caught the king's eye. Soon, the king was throwing a celebratory feast for his new queen. There was only one problem. Esther was Jewish, and the king was not. But Esther, being the intelligent young woman that she was, decided to keep that a secret.

Life continued on, more or less as usual, for a number of years. During this time, Mordecai, Esther's caregiver, would often hang around the entrance to the castle. He was curious about what the royals were up to, and he always hoped for a bit of news about the lovely Queen Esther. One day, when Mordecai was sitting at the palace gates, the king's right-hand man, **Haman** {HAY-mun} rode by. Everyone bowed before him as he passed by. But Mordecai, being Jewish just like Esther, would only bow before God. When **Haman** saw Mordecai just standing there, he became enraged. How dare Mordercai refuse to bow before the great and mighty **Haman**!!

Have you ever been asked to do something that just felt totally wrong?

To punish Mordecai's ill-mannered behavior, **Haman** decided that all the Jews in the land should be killed. He threw some stones, kind of like dice, on the ground to determine the exact date of their extermination. The stones indicated that the date should be set for the 13th day of the month of Adar. Then, **Haman** and the king's secretaries created another edict and persuaded King Ahasuerus to sign and seal it.

When the Jewish people heard about the new law of the land, they were completely distraught. Why were they all being killed?! What had they done that was so wrong?! How could the king allow his minions to destroy an entire population?! Mordecai decided it was time to get Queen Esther involved. He sent word to her, saying, "Tell Queen Esther that she must intervene and save the Jewish people. If King Ahasuerus discovers, which he surely will, that she is also Jewish, she will die, too. She has more access to the king than any other Jew in the land. Surely, she can convince him to change his mind. It's a matter of life and death!"

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The messenger relayed Mordecai's desperate plea to Esther. At first, she was very afraid. It's true that she was a queen, but she still had very little power. She was permitted to see the king only if he called for her. How would she even have an occasion to talk the king out of this horrible plan before the 13th of Adar arrived?! But, as you know, Esther was very clever, and she devised a rather ingenious plan.

First, Queen Esther invited the king and **Haman** to a spectacular banquet. The two men had a wonderful time, eating, drinking, and regaling one another with stories about their wealth and courage. As the evening came to a close, the king said to Esther, "My dear queen, what a lovely feast you have offered. What do you desire in return? Ask for anything, my love, even half my kingdom, and it shall be granted to you. Please, make your request."

What do you think Queen Esther will ask for?

You might think Queen Esther would ask for the safety of her people. But Esther was much more clever than that. You see, King Ahasuerus was like a fish caught on a hook way out in the middle of a lake. She needed to reel him in very slowly. So, Queen Esther replied, "My dearest King, I am delighted that this banquet has pleased you. My only request is that you and **Haman** join me again. Tomorrow night. I promise the feast will be even bigger and better than this one."

The king, delighted that Esther's sole desire was to please him, quickly agreed to her request.

The next night, the king and **Haman** enjoyed yet another festive evening prepared for them by Queen Esther. And once again, after eating and drinking his fill, the king said to Esther, "My dear queen, what a lovely feast you have offered. What do you desire in return? Ask for anything, my love, even half my kingdom, and it shall be granted to you. Please, make your request."

This time, Esther answered, "If it please Your Lord, I beg you to give me, and all my people, our lives. We are to be killed and completely destroyed in the very near future."

"What?" the king responded. "What do you mean by this?! Who has done such a horrible thing?! Where is he?!"

Esther turned to **Haman** and said, "This wicked man, the one sitting right next to you, is the enemy of our people."

The king was furious when he heard what **Haman** had done. He ordered that **Haman** be executed for his role in the evil plot. Then, he gave all of **Haman's** possessions to Mordecai.

But the royal edict to kill all the Jews was still in place. The king had signed and sealed it, so it could not be revoked. Esther had managed to save herself and Mordecai, but the rest of the Jewish people were still in very grave danger.

Any ideas about what should be done now?

Once again, the clever Esther came to the rescue. She had the king write a second edict that he also signed and sealed. This edict allowed the Jewish people to defend themselves against any and all attacks. When their enemies arrived on the 13th day of Adar, the Jews were ready, striking them down with swords. The Jewish people prevailed, and the next day – the 14th of Adar – became a day of feasting and gladness for all the Jews in the kingdom.

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Even today, thousands of years later, Jews still celebrate Queen Esther courageously saving the Jewish people from certain death. The holiday is called Purim, which means "Festival of Lots," because **Haman** cast lots to decide the exact date of their annihilation. On Purim, Jews all over the world dress up in costumes, eat sweet treats, and joyfully remember the defeat of the evil **Haman**.

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