La Comédiathèque

Checkmate



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Translation by the author

Politics often resembles a game of chess in which morality has no place. Whether one side plays white or black, each tries to defeat the other until only one king remains. Yet the game is absurd: the moment an opponent is defeated, the game ends, and all that remains is the prospect of a rematch. In this dark comedy, the king and queen, along with those plotting to replace them, are ready to sacrifice every pawn on the board. A tragicomic portrait of the excesses of people infected by the political bug...

Characters

The King
The Queen
The Princess
The Leader of the Opposition
The Minister
The General
The Butler
The Chambermaid

The Minister, General, Butler and Chambermaid may be played by performers of either sex, with no changes to the dialogue or only minor adjustments.

Possible casts: 6 men / 2 women, 5 men / 3 women, 4 men / 4 women, 3 men / 5 women, or 2 men / 6 women.

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ACT 1

The throne room. The action takes place in an imaginary European country, at an unspecified time. The King sits on his throne, wearing his crown. He is reading a newspaper whose headlines speak of a national crisis and growing unrest. The people are hungry and are demanding reforms. He folds the paper and throws it onto a low table already holding his breakfast tray.

King – After all I've done for them... Such ingratitude... *(Sighs)* They'll be the death of me... *(Collecting himself)* But I won't let them have their way...

He shakes a bell with a handle. No one comes. Impatiently, he shakes the bell a little louder. His butler appears.

Butler – Your Majesty rang. How may I be of service?

King – Bring me a rope.

Butler – A rope?

King – Yes, a rope. Don't you know what a rope is?

Butler – What kind of rope, Your Majesty?

King – Let's say... a rope strong enough to bear the weight of a man.

Butler – That kind of rope, I see... I will bring it to you immediately, Your Majesty...

The butler exits, a bit concerned. The chambermaid enters.

Chambermaid – Forgive me, Your Majesty. May I clear away your breakfast?

King – Please, go ahead... Actually, I'll have to climb onto this table later to hang myself.

Without flinching, the chambermaid takes hold of the tray on the coffee table.

Chambermaid – I see Your Majesty has hardly touched breakfast. Was something not to your liking?

King – What can you do, my dear, life is unfair. The poor are hungry, and the rich have no appetite...

Chambermaid – Would Your Majesty like anything else?

Instead of answering, he gives her a somewhat peculiar look.

King – May I ask you a question?

Chambermaid (*defensively*) – I am at Your Majesty's service...

King – Do you love me?

Chambermaid – Do I love you?

King – No, I don't mean... love as a woman might love a man.

Chambermaid – Oh no?

King – Besides, we have already slept together, haven't we?

Chambermaid – I don't remember, Your Majesty...

King – You don't remember?

Chambermaid – Of course I do... Well, no, actually...

King – What do you mean, you do but you don't?

Chambermaid – What I mean is, I don't think Your Majesty and I...

King – I have never slept with you?

Chambermaid – No, Your Majesty.

King – Are you sure?

Chambermaid – I think I would remember...

King – You're right. I must be mistaking you for someone else...

Chambermaid – Someone else?

King – The other chambermaid.

Chambermaid – Your Majesty has only one chambermaid... Well, at least one assigned to his personal service.

King – Really?

Chambermaid – And only one butler as well.

King – That's strange... Why is that?

Chambermaid – To limit the risk of being murdered, I imagine...

King – Yes, you're right... In that case, I must be mistaking you for the chambermaid who was here before you.

Chambermaid – Before me?

King – Yes, before you. How long have you been in my service?

Chambermaid – Ten years, Your Majesty.

King – Ten years! Well, I don't know... I must be confusing you with my wife, then.

Chambermaid – Certainly, Your Majesty.

King – No. What I really wanted to ask is... do you have any affection for me?

Chambermaid – Affection?

King – Do you like me? As a person...

Chambermaid – As a person...?

King – As a king, then! Everyone is supposed to like their king, aren't they?

Chambermaid – But of course, Your Majesty...

King – So what?

Chambermaid – Well, you had my first two husbands executed...

King – Oh really... That's strange, I didn't remember that either... And why would I have done such a thing?

Chambermaid – You had accused them of espionage, but...

King – But?

Chambermaid – I believe it was actually because they were beating you at chess...

The king appears somewhat bewildered.

King – I see... Well, take this tray and get out of here!

Chambermaid – Shall I take the newspaper too, Your Majesty?

King – Yes, yes, remove everything. And burn that rag...

Chambermaid – What rag, Your Majesty...?

King – That newspaper!

Chambermaid – Very well, Your Majesty. *(She picks up the newspaper and glances at the headlines.)* Oh yes... Rather inflammatory reading, by the look of it.

King – Leave!

The chambermaid exits. The butler returns with a rope tied in a noose.

Butler – Here is Your Majesty's rope. I've taken the liberty of tying a noose. My father taught me all sorts of knots when I was a child. He was a sailor...

King – Mine was a butcher. He hanged himself from a meat hook in his cold store...

Butler – I see... Would Your Majesty prefer me to bring a butcher's hook? To honour the family tradition...

King – You may leave. And I don't want to be disturbed anymore.

Butler – Very well, Your Majesty.

The butler exits with a concerned look. The king takes the rope. He glances up at the ceiling, then climbs onto the coffee table, holding the rope in his hand, obviously looking for a place to hang it. But the table is too low. His minister enters and observes the scene for a moment without the king noticing.

Minister – My respects, Your Majesty.

The king startles, nearly falling off the table.

King – You scared me, you fool... I almost fell...

Minister – I beg Your Majesty's pardon.

King – Breaking your neck falling off the table you climbed onto to hang yourself... That would be a particularly stupid way to die, wouldn't it?

Minister – I agree, Your Majesty.

King – What are you doing here? I specifically asked not to be disturbed.

The minister observes the king, standing on the coffee table, holding the rope to hang himself.

Minister – My goodness... I came to inquire about Your Majesty's well-being... Things don't seem to be going very well today.

King – You are truly perceptive. I was right to take you on as minister and advisor.

Minister – What is wrong, Your Majesty?

King – What is wrong? Don't you read the newspapers?

Minister – Only those issued by our Ministry of Propaganda, Your Majesty. The others seem designed to demoralise the population.

King – Well, precisely. For some time now, I've been demoralised by what I read in the independent press.

Minister – Don't dwell on the dark side, Your Majesty. There's always a light at the end of the tunnel.

King – Yes, when you're dead, they say that's what you see: a light at the end of a tunnel.

Minister – If Your Majesty wishes to confide in me, I can be your confessor... You can count on my discretion. I'll be as silent as the grave.

The king slumps back on his throne.

King – Until now, everything had gone my way. I was elected president four times...

Minister – By changing the constitution each time to make it constitutional.

King – When that was no longer possible, I got elected president for life.

Minister – And to ensure that your daughter could one day succeed you on the throne, you finally restored the monarchy.

King – I placed this crown on my head with my own hands.

Minister – Like Napoleon.

King – I admit, wearing a crown was a childhood dream. Making my wife a queen and my daughter a princess... Who hasn't dreamed of that?

Minister – You've made that dream come true.

King – And I know that I was able to count on your wise counsel, the loyalty of our army, and the persuasive power of our secret police.

Minister – Then why this gloomy mood?

King – Nothing is going right any more, and you know it. You don't need to read the papers to realise that. Just listen to the noise from the streets. You can hear it even here in the palace. They're demonstrating right under my windows!

Minister – The people... Like a quiet river that can suddenly burst its banks.

King – If we're not careful, these floodwaters could well sweep away our palace.

Minister – We can always channel an overflowing river. Would you like me to send in the troops?

King – That won't be enough anymore, I'm afraid. The country is on the brink of collapse. The people have nothing to eat. When the fear of starving overrides the fear of the police, there is a revolt. And when the people's anger turns against the king, it's revolution.

Minister – So what should we do?

King – You're my minister, I thought you were the one to tell me...

The minister sits down as well.

Minister – You're right... The people are demanding free elections, and we cannot deny them much longer.

King – I wonder if we were right to tolerate these opponents...

Minister – We had to maintain a pretence of democracy for our international reputation. The whole world is watching... and the rest of Europe is still subsidising us.

King – But our people hate us! If we accept free elections, the verdict will be clear. It will be the end of the monarchy! And for us, it will probably be the end of everything...

Minister – Yes... unless we manage to get a puppet candidate elected...

King – A puppet candidate?

Minister – A man... or a woman. We would present the candidate as independent, although entirely loyal to you. The monarchy would remain, as it does in several European countries. The Prime Minister would be one of our own, and you would still pull the strings from behind the scenes...

King – We'll still need a new constitution... How many have there been since I was first elected?

Minister – Eight, if I'm not mistaken. This would be the ninth.

King – And I suppose you see yourself as the nation's saviour... or perhaps its next Prime Minister?

Minister – I am at Your Majesty's service. But if necessary, we could find a more credible candidate...

King – I don't believe in that anymore... This time, the people won't follow us. Despite all our tricks to rig the election, I'll end up lynched, like a common dictator.

Minister – That's a possibility, unfortunately...

King – Thank you for your support... It uplifts my spirits... No, I'd rather go out in style.

Minister – In style? Hanging from the chandelier in the throne room?

King – If I'm going to hang, I'd rather remain in control of the timing and the place...

Minister – Pull yourself together, Your Majesty. Many people still rely on you, and you can rely on them.

King – Just admit that you're afraid of suffering the same fate as me.

Minister – I might have a solution, just wait a bit before hanging yourself.

King – I never thought I would hear that from my most faithful advisor...

Minister – The game of power is a chess match, Your Majesty. And in chess, the king is the only piece that cannot commit suicide.

King – But the player can abandon the game if he feels there's no hope left.

Minister – You are the king. Let me lead the game. I will come back to you soon and present a strategy that, I'm sure, will surprise you...

King – I'm eager to know it...

Minister – See you soon, Your Majesty.

The minister exits, leaving the king more than perplexed. He picks up the rope and looks at it, hesitating. The queen storms in like a whirlwind.

Queen – I'm terribly late. Have you seen the chambermaid, by any chance?

King – She was here a moment ago. I told her I didn't want to be disturbed...

Queen – That's exactly what I said! When you want to take a nap, you're sure to have her on your back, but when you really need her...

King – On your back?

Queen – Well, yes... It's a popular expression...

King – Having the maid on your back when you are taking a nap...?

Queen – You don't seem well, my dear... That's what I was saying, you'd better go take a nap...

King – That's precisely it, I'm still hesitating between a nap and eternal sleep.

The queen notices the rope.

Queen – What on earth is this horror?

King – A rope.

Queen – Speaking of ropes, I was thinking of going shopping in London this afternoon. Do you need the private jet?

King – No, I don't intend to use the jet today... But what's a rope got to do with it?

Queen – Nothing... Why?

King – You said... speaking of ropes, I was thinking of going shopping in London...

Queen – It's just an expression, darling! A phrase people use to move from one subject to another. When you say 'speaking of ropes', the next thing you say doesn't actually have to be about ropes. It's called... a conversational U-turn.

King – More like a complete change of subject.

Queen – You've really decided to upset me today... Don't you think I'm upset enough as it is? And how did we end up talking about ropes anyway?

King – You're right, we should never talk about ropes in the house of a hanged man.

Queen – Has someone ever hanged themselves in this palace?

King – No, not yet.

Queen – So I can take the jet then.

King – Absolutely.

Queen – It's Black Friday today, you know.

King – Ah yes... Black Friday...

Queen – Everything has become so expensive now. Especially with our currency constantly depreciating. Do you see where I've ended up? Bargain hunting like a common chambermaid... Speaking of the chambermaid, if you see her, send her to me, will you?

King – I won't forget.

Queen – Yes, because I might as well take her with me.

King – So she can go shopping too?

Queen – No, so she can carry the parcels! You didn't need her, did you?

King – No, no...

Queen – In that case, I must leave you... I'm leaving in an hour, and I'm not even dressed yet. So, see you tonight!

King – That's right... See you tonight, my dear...

The queen exits, leaving the king dumbfounded. The noise of the crowd outside can be heard. He shakes his bell again. The butler returns.

Butler – How may I serve Your Majesty?

King – Do you hear those shouts outside?

Butler (*embarrassed*) – No, Your Majesty...

King – If you can't hear them, you must be deaf... Are you deaf?

Butler – No, Your Majesty.

King – Then you hear those shouts, as I do. But you're afraid of being executed if you tell me you hear them... Are you afraid of being executed?

Butler – Well... Yes, of course, Your Majesty... Like everyone else...

King – Like everyone else?

Butler – I misspoke, Your Majesty...

King – You can tell me anything, you know. I'm asking you. I demand it. I can hear their cries, but I can't make out what they're saying. What are they saying?

Butler – It's true, I... I think I vaguely hear something now. But I assure you, I can't understand a word of those screams...

King – They're shouting "death to the tyrant," that's what they're shouting!

Butler – Ah yes, perhaps... Now that you mention it...

The king sighs wearily and collapses onto his throne.

King – All I ever wanted was to be loved for who I am.

Butler – But Your Majesty... you are a tyrant.

King – I haven't always been one, you know... When I was first elected, in a perfectly democratic way, people were also shouting in the streets. But it was to remind me of all the hopes they had placed in me. And to shout out their love for me. Do you remember that?

Butler – Well, no, Your Majesty...

King – I was young. So were they. I sincerely wanted them to be happy, I assure you. And then, little by little, corruption set in, like a worm in the fruit. Power corrupts, absolute power corrupts absolutely. Do you know who said that?

Butler – Machiavelli, I believe, Your Majesty.

King – Hope turned into disappointment, disappointment into resignation, resignation into despair, despair into anger, and anger into hatred... How do you win back the heart of a woman you've disappointed and only managed to keep by using force?

Butler – I don't know, Your Majesty. How do you keep a woman who hates you? Apart from keeping her frozen in a cold room, I imagine it's impossible...

King – The people who march today to demand my death are still as young as those who celebrated my victory yesterday. I'm the one who's grown old... I'm rotten from the inside... Can't you smell the rot?

Butler – I'm sorry, Your Majesty. I've had a bit of a stuffy nose for a few days. I've lost my sense of smell. I don't know what it is. It must be a virus.

King – It's true, in fact, you have a runny nose. It's an absolutely distressing sight, I assure you.

Butler – I apologise, Your Majesty.

King – If your nose is running, blow it. You know the saying?

Butler – I'll do that right away... if Your Majesty no longer needs me.

King – Very well, you may go.

Butler – Should I take the rope with me, or does Your Majesty plan to use it later in the evening?

King – You may take it away...

Butler – Very well, Your Majesty.

The butler reluctantly takes the rope and exits. The princess enters.

Princess – Good morning, Father.

King – Good morning, my daughter.

Princess – I just saw the butler carrying a rope... I wonder who he's planning to tie the knot with...

King – Perhaps the chambermaid...

Princess – Is the butler getting married?

King – I don't know, why?

Princess – You said he would tie the knot with the chambermaid.

King – I meant an actual knot. I was wondering whether he'd use the rope to hang her from the kitchen chandelier...

Princess – Why would he do such a thing?

King – I don't know... They keep quarrelling about everything.

Princess – I think it's actually her who will send him somewhere else to be hanged...

King – Then why did you think they were getting married?

Princess – It's just an expression. Surely you've heard of 'tying the knot'? It means getting married.

King – I didn't know that...

Princess – It's a popular expression.

King – Unfortunately, I no longer know how the people speak...

Princess – Yet you are a child of the people too.

King – That's true. My father was a butcher, my mother ran the cash register, and when I was your age, I was an apprentice...

Princess – I hope that after being president and then king, you won't go down in history as the butcher of your own people...

King – Unless it's the people who soon plant my head on a pike to exhibit it in the streets as a trophy. Can you hear those cries outside?

Princess – Yes.

King – What exactly are they saying?

Princess – Exactly? *(She listens for a moment.)* Some are shouting "Down with the dictatorship!" Others, "Free elections!" But what I hear most often is... "The king is in check!" Or even "Checkmate!"

King – I'm sure they're aware of my passion for chess...

Princess – How strange. Someone's shouting, 'Down with the baker, his wife and their little bun!'

King – The little baker's boy, perhaps.

Princess – What's a baker's boy?

King – An apprentice. Someone learning to bake bread.

Princess – But you never worked in a bakery. You just told me your father was a butcher.

King – It seems they've forgotten where I come from.

Princess – I think they're more worried about where we're all heading. What they want is bread.

King – If I had any bread, I'd give it to them, believe me. *(Patting his stomach.)* Unfortunately, all I have left is cake... Aren't you going shopping in London with your mother?

Princess – No... Strangely enough, the idea of going shopping on a private jet while our people are starving makes me feel guilty.

King – Don't judge me too harshly, my daughter. Others will take care of that. And their verdict will be final.

Princess – There may still be time to avoid the worst...

King – I'm afraid it may already be too late... Still, if things go wrong, we can always flee the country with the treasury. Your mother and I can retire peacefully in a friendly country, and you can finish your education at an exclusive boarding school in Switzerland.

Princess – A friendly country? Are you sure? These days, deposed dictators often end up before an international tribunal.

King – Everyone's trying to cheer me up these days.

Princess – I'm just trying to open your eyes...

King – When the time comes, I hope you'll be there to close them for me... And what about you, my daughter? Have you found someone to tie the knot with?

Princess – I wouldn't put it that way, but... maybe.

King – Do you want to talk to me about it?

Princess – It's still a little too early. It would be too overwhelming for you all at once...

The minister returns.

Minister – Your Majesty, I thought you were alone...

Princess – I was leaving.

Minister – My respects, Princess.

Princess – Minister...

The princess gives her a cold look and leaves.

King – So, have you found an idea to save us from the scaffold?

Minister – It's more than just an idea, Your Majesty. It's a plan.

King – I'm eager to hear it.

Minister – You'll hear it soon. But first we need to buy time to put it into action. Time is running out, Your Majesty. As you can hear, the uprising is growing.

King – The army and the police are still loyal to us, aren't they?

Minister – For now. But we shouldn't rely too much on them. Everyone in uniform is a weather vane. They don't move with a light breeze, but at the first storm, they follow the direction of the wind.

King – I'm listening...

Minister – The protesters are surrounding the palace, stirred up by the few opponents we haven't yet thrown in jail.

King – We should have eliminated them, just like the others.

Minister – I disagree, Your Majesty. There's nothing more dangerous than an angry crowd without a leader to channel their anger.

King – And do you know this leader?

Minister – I have made contact with him. He's requesting an audience. At least with him, we can negotiate.

King – Negotiate? Negotiate what? The length of the rope they'll hang us with?

Minister – For now, it's only about buying time... Time to implement our plan.

King – In that case, I trust you. I hope neither of us will have to regret it. Where is this rebel leader?

Minister – He's at the palace gate, with the others. I'll ask someone to bring him in.

King – In that case, I'll tidy up my appearance a bit before receiving him... I wouldn't want to make a bad impression... And making him wait a little can't hurt... For now, I am still the king.

Minister – And those who support you are ready to do anything to ensure you remain so...

They exit. The princess returns with her mother, who is about to leave.

Queen – Are you quite sure you don't want to come to London with me?

Princess – I'm not in the mood for that right now, I assure you.

Queen – Could it be that you're in love, by any chance...?

Princess – Maybe... but that's not the point. Can't you see what's happening?

Queen – What I can see is that you're dressed like Cinderella rather than a princess. You'll never find a husband dressed like that. Come shopping!

Princess – On a private jet?

Queen – You wouldn't want me to fly with a low-cost airline, would you?

Princess – Why not?

Queen – With all these viruses going around, travelling among all those poor people who can't even afford a meal tray on an aircraft...

Princess – These poor people, as you say, can't even afford a proper meal at home. As for flying...

Queen – It's not my fault that they're poor, after all...

Princess – Are you sure about that?

Queen – And what do you expect me to do about it?

Princess – You could at least do your shopping in our country...

Queen – Sadly, our shops have been empty for ages... In London the shops are full of wonderful things, and everything is on sale! What woman could resist?

Princess – Me, for example.

Queen – Well, too bad for you... (*Looking at her watch*) Anyway, I have to go, I have a plane to catch.

Princess – It won't leave without you. It's the king's private plane...

Queen – Oh yes, that's true... I'll never get used to it... I wonder how I managed before...

Princess – You were already shopping sales, I imagine, but at the local supermarket... Back when there was still something on the shelves...

Queen – That was a long time ago... I worked behind the counter in your grandparents' butcher's shop. That's where I met your father. Sometimes I wonder whether we were happier then. We were young and had our whole lives ahead of us. The older we get, the more money it takes to make us happy. Luxury is a drug: the more you have, the higher the dose you need.

Princess – That's why I'd rather not start.

The leader of the opposition appears, introduced by the butler.

Queen – But who is this handsome young man? Is he your fiancé? He seems very nice...

Princess – He's the leader of the opposition. Just five minutes ago, he was shouting with the others under our windows that he wanted to cut off the heads of the three of us...

Queen – Oh, really?

Leader – My respects, Your Majesty...

Queen – Well, he's certainly polite... Anyway, I'll leave you now, I have to hurry...

The queen exits.

Butler – If Sir would be so kind as to wait here, His Majesty will receive him in a moment.

The butler exits.

Leader – Hello, my princess...

They exchange a kiss, but she quickly frees herself from his embrace.

Princess – Let's be cautious. My father will be here soon...

Leader – I suppose he doesn't know about us.

Princess – No... and it's better that way. Especially for you...

Leader – You're right... Besides, it could look bad for me too... The leader of the opposition dating the tyrant's daughter... Better to keep it all secret for now...

Princess – And then what?

Leader – Then what?

Princess – And after that? When you've removed the King, what are you going to do? Sit on his throne?

Leader – To begin with, organise free elections. And if the people give me their votes... But it's not over yet... What are his plans?

Princess – He's considering hanging himself.

Leader – That would solve some of our problems...

Princess – He's still my father, after all. If we could avoid that...

Leader – At the very least, it means he's ready to negotiate.

Princess – Yes... but we'll also have to convince his minister. It's not just the king. Many people have a lot to lose if the monarch is overthrown.

Leader – I'm not naïve. No dictator stays in power without a sizeable share of the population supporting him: the privileged, part of the middle class, the military, religious leaders... All those who benefit from the regime and therefore support it, actively or silently. Even people guilty of terrible crimes have friends. At least at first...

Princess – But you can't compare my father to a mass murderer.

Leader – Help me stop him before he becomes the executioner of his own people.

Princess – I'm on your side, you know that. I just don't want any more bloodshed.

Leader – That mostly depends on your father...

The king enters accompanied by his minister. The minister is surprised to see the opposition leader in the company of the princess.

Minister – Good morning, Sir. My respects, Princess...

Leader – Good morning, Madam... (*To the king*) Sir...

Minister – It is customary to address the King as "Your Majesty".

Leader – I mean no disrespect by reminding His Majesty that, not so long ago, he was President for Life. Before that, he was an elected President.

King – Princess, please leave us, if you please.

Princess – Yes, father...

The princess exits.

King – I've agreed to receive you in an attempt to calm things down and avoid an escalation of violence. You'll understand that we can't tolerate such disorder for very long.

Leader – It is you who have caused this disorder, by imposing an unacceptable order by force.

Minister – We're here to listen to your demands.

Leader – By systematically plundering the country's wealth for the benefit of a ruling clique, you have brought the country to ruin. We demand a return to democracy.

Minister – You don't intend to demand that the King abdicate?

Leader – We're not attached to symbols. The monarchy can remain in place if it's the solution for a smooth democratic transition. All we want is for the assembly to be elected by the people. It is this assembly which will appoint the Prime Minister, and it is this Prime Minister who will conduct the Nation's policy.

King – And of course, you could see yourself in that position.

Leader – That will be for the voters to decide. But yes, I will be a candidate.

Minister – If we agree to your request, you'll understand that we will need a few guarantees.

Leader – I'm listening.

Minister – We don't want to be held accountable for the past. It will be a give-and-take situation: free elections in exchange for an immunity agreement.

Leader – We're only interested in the country's future. We're not looking for revenge.

Minister – Very well, we will consider your proposal and get back to you as soon as possible.

Leader – Don't take too long... I won't be able to contain the anger of the streets for much longer... (*Saluting the king with a hint of irony*) Your Majesty...

The leader exits.

King – You're remarkably accommodating. If we agree to free elections, we'll lose them. At best, I'll end up like the British monarch, cutting ribbons but holding no real power. At worst, I'll meet the fate of Louis XVI, who lost his head on the guillotine. In a few years, they'll tear up this immunity agreement, put us all on trial, and you'll be in the cart beside me on our way to the executioner...

Minister – I'm aware of all that.

King – And then?

Minister – It's just a matter of buying a little time.

King – Time? What for?

Minister – It's time to tell you my plan... But first I've taken the liberty of summoning the general in charge of our secret weapons programme...

King – Very secret indeed... I didn't even know we had such a programme...

Minister – The general will be here in a moment.

Fade to black.

ACT 2

The king is sitting on his throne, playing chess with himself, deep in thought. The queen enters, empty-handed, followed by the maid, carrying a stack of piled-up packages.

Queen (*to the chambermaid*) – Put all that in my dressing room, dear. You can tidy it up later. You must be tired too...

Chambermaid – Yes, Your Majesty.

Queen – For now, draw me a bath... You can rest later...

Chambermaid – Of course, Your Majesty.

The maid exits with the packages.

Queen – My God, I'm exhausted...

King – Did you find what you were looking for, at least...?

Queen – I hardly bought anything.

King – I can see that...

Queen – The stores were so crowded. And then they'll say there's a crisis.

King – Sales... They attract women like blood attracts sharks...

Queen – But these were luxury brands! At Harrods, in London! I didn't expect it to be like a clearance sale at the local supermarket.

King – It's worrying, indeed. When the dictators' wives are reduced to shopping sales, it means their husbands are close to bankruptcy... And that the dictatorship of the proletariat is not far away...

Queen – And how was your day?

King – I think I'm going to organise a sale too.

Queen – At the palace? What are you going to put on sale?

King – The monarchy and all its symbols! Total liquidation before definitive closure. I could start by selling my throne and crown. What do you think?

Queen – You shouldn't joke about that... Well, after my bath, I think I'll go straight to bed. I don't have much of an appetite...

King – That's our problem, my dear. We've lost the appetite for power. Go sleep the sleep of the innocent, hoping that the awakening won't be too difficult...

Queen – I'll leave you to your witty remarks. I'm too tired to understand them...

King – Good night, my queen... *(The Queen leaves.)* Blessed are the simple-minded: they can sleep through anything... I doubt I'll sleep tonight.

The king slumps on his throne, visibly overwhelmed. The princess arrives.

Princess – Your Majesty... I hope I'm not disturbing you...

King – Good evening, Princess. You never disturb me, you know that well. To what do I owe the pleasure of this evening visit?

Princess – I just wanted to wish you good evening. But you seem worried. Can I be of any help?

King – It is the duty of all kings to care about the future of their subjects. Just as it is the duty of all fathers to worry about the future of their children...

Princess – It's admirable of you to treat your subjects like your own children.

King – Like children, my subjects can be unruly at times. They also challenge my authority.

Princess – It's the destiny of peoples, like children, to want to emancipate themselves one day.

King – Perhaps, when the time comes... But let's talk about lighter subjects... How was your day?

Princess – Each day brings us closer to the precipice, as you well know...

King – That's a serious thought for someone of your age.

Princess – At my age, you were already a minister.

King – That's true. And I will do everything in my power to make you queen after me. Nothing is certain today, but I'm working on it, believe me.

Princess – Don't bother, I assure you. I don't want to become queen at any cost.

King – Unfortunately, I'm not sure you still have the choice to renounce the throne. History is not kind to fallen monarchs. More than one has lost his head.

Princess – You can live without reigning.

King – As far as we're concerned, unfortunately, I'm afraid that to continue to live, we must continue to reign.

Princess – Even if to continue reigning, we have to massacre our own people?

King – Massacre... Such a big word from such a young mouth... Leave the burden of power to me for a little longer, my daughter. Enjoy what remains of your innocence, and let me make the hard decisions needed to keep our heads on our shoulders.

Princess – I know these decisions are difficult, but I fear you're being badly advised... Your minister...

King – That's enough! Leave me now. I have an audience in a moment. And for the moment, I remain the king...

Princess – Very well, Your Majesty...

The princess reluctantly exits. The king remains pensive and troubled for a moment, then exits as well. The maid enters and tidies up the room. Her gaze falls on the throne. She looks around to make sure no one is coming, then carefully sits on the throne. She closes her eyes, filled with emotion, and doesn't notice the butler approaching.

Butler – Your Majesty...?

The maid startles and quickly stands up, before recognising the butler and sighing in relief.

Chambermaid – You scared me... I thought I was done for...

Butler – If it had been the king who caught you, you'd already be dead.

Chambermaid – Don't tell me the thought has never crossed your mind...

Butler – To kill you?

Chambermaid – To experience what it feels like to sit on this throne.

Butler – I'm not sure that today, sitting on this throne is a more desirable position than lying on the plank of a guillotine. Just listen to the clamour in the streets, and you'll know that the monarch's days are numbered.

Chambermaid – The revolution... And then? What will become of us?

Butler – The monarchy has only existed for a few years, and here we are already wondering how we're going to survive it. Yet it is this monarch who has led the country to ruin.

Chambermaid – That's true. People often prefer the reassuring certainty of slavery over the glorious uncertainty of freedom.

Butler – He killed your two previous husbands.

Chambermaid – That's why it's so difficult for me to find a third... Are you volunteering?

Butler – Why do you remain in his service?

Chambermaid – Like you, I imagine. To be in the front row when they come to take him to the scaffold...

Butler – Which unfortunately will lead us to look for other employment.

Chambermaid – Don't worry too much about that. Whether king, dictator, or democratically elected president, they always need someone to serve them at the table and polish their hundreds of pairs of shoes.

Butler – You are an idealist, my dear.

Chambermaid – Believe me, the true revolution will come when those who govern us clean their own toilet bowls...

The butler and the maid exit. The princess returns, accompanied by the opposition leader.

Princess – So, how much?

Leader – How much?

Princess – Haven't they tried to buy you off?

Leader – For now, they're offering me a deal. Free elections in exchange for total immunity for them and the whole ruling clique.

Princess – I see...

Leader – You don't look happy.This is what you wanted, isn't it? To save the king's head...

Princess – It's not like him... and it's not like them either.

Leader – They're afraid, it's only human. In fact, that's about the only thing that still makes them human: the fear of dying.

Princess – No dictator willingly gives up power in return for a promise of immunity, a comfortable pension and good medical care.

The leader seems to agree.

Leader – In any case, not many dictators have died in their beds after ceding power.

Princess – It's a fool's bargain, and they know it very well.

Leader – So why did they propose it?

Princess – It's a trap.

Leader – That's what I think too... But how do we know what they're plotting?

The princess casts a worried glance towards the wings.

Princess – Someone's coming... We mustn't be seen together. Let's hide over here...

The princess leads the leader behind a curtain or a screen. The king enters. He paces back and forth, lost in thought. The minister arrives, accompanied by the general, in military attire adorned with decorations.

Minister – Your Majesty, may I introduce the General in charge of our unconventional weapons programme.

General – Your Majesty...

King – General. Judging by the number of medals you wear on your jacket, you must have distinguished yourself in numerous battles.

General – Thank you, Your Majesty.

King – Which surprises me a little, since our country hasn't known war for over half a century.

General – There are many ways to serve your country, Your Majesty.

Minister – The general has been leading research into electronic and biological warfare for several years now.

King – Electronic and biological warfare? What's the connection between the two?

General – Viruses, Your Majesty. Whether they are computer viruses or biological ones, the goal is the same: to disrupt the enemy's defence system and reduce their reactive capabilities.

King – In this case, we don't have many external enemies.

General – In the military, Your Majesty, an enemy is an enemy, wherever he comes from...

King – The suspense has lasted long enough. What is your plan?

Minister – The scientists working on this top-secret programme have developed a highly contagious virus.

King – A virus?

General – This virus was intended to be used against foreign countries that would be hostile to us, triggering a devastating epidemic that would affect their population, and therefore their economy, and their soldiers, and thus their military capabilities...

King – I see... A disease... A contagious disease...

Minister – Highly contagious. And since it's a new virus, no one has a vaccine yet.

The king solemnly contemplates the implications of these statements.

King – If I understand correctly, you're suggesting that we infect our own people?

General – It's our last-ditch plan, Your Majesty. There is no alternative plan.

King – Minister?

Minister – Law enforcement is overwhelmed. The situation will soon be out of control.

King – What about the army, General?

General – Its resources are hardly suited for maintaining order. Furthermore, soldiers are always more reluctant than police officers to shoot their fellow citizens. They have been trained to wage war, not to put down revolts. Putting the army on the street means risking fraternization.

Minister – Unfortunately, Your Majesty, I see no other solution to prevent the overthrow of the monarchy in the coming weeks. We're playing our last card here. And we must act quickly, or it will be too late.

King – So I will go down in history as the one who decimated his own people in order to stay in power and escape the scaffold...

General – This virus is not lethal, Your Majesty. Well, not systematically... It is only meant to weaken our opponents...

Minister – Of course, no one must know that this is a virus created artificially in our military laboratories, and not a natural virus as regularly appears from time to time.

King – And you think this epidemic launched against our own people will solve all our problems?

General – The goal is less to eliminate our most active opponents than to divert the people's attention. While they are busy fighting this epidemic, they won't be thinking about protesting.

Minister – Like during the great plagues, people will think only of escaping the virus, the common enemy of the homeland. In times of crisis, people no longer think about revolution, but only about saving their skins.

General – And in that situation people turn to whoever is in power. That's what we call national unity.

King – And then?

General – We declare a state of emergency and impose a curfew. This will allow us to regain control of the situation under the pretext of fighting the spread of this epidemic.

King – It won't last for ever... With a sick population and a ruined economy, I'll soon be ruling over nothing but rubble and corpses...

Minister – That's not the objective, of course... We won't let the situation get that bad.

King – Then what?

General – We wait a few months, and we roll out the vaccine.

Minister – The epidemic is defeated, thanks to the authority of the state, the wisdom of the king, and the wise advice of his ministers, supported by the army and the police.

General – You're popular again. And the last opponents are thrown into prison under the pretext of quarantine... If some don't survive, too bad for them.

Minister – Trust me, Your Majesty. Nothing works better than starting a fire and then being hailed for putting it out.

King – Except, of course, if we discover that this virus is indeed artificial and that we intentionally spread it.

General – If necessary, we'll accuse those terrorists of spreading the virus themselves... and that will be one more reason to let them rot in a cell before executing them.

The king remains perplexed.

King – What if we ourselves were infected?

General – Of course, our scientists have already developed an effective vaccine against this dangerous disease. You, as well as all the regime dignitaries, will be vaccinated even before we spread this virus.

Minister – So we are confident that we will be able to vaccinate the population when we deem it appropriate.

Dead silence.

King – It's a diabolical plan... that could work. But isn't it playing with fire?

Minister – It's the only solution we have left...

King – How many casualties are you expecting?

General – We don't know exactly, but you can't make an omelette without breaking some eggs.

King – You certainly have a gift for homely sayings. In less homely language, it's called a crime against humanity.

The king hesitates once again.

Minister – Only the weakest will perish, Your Majesty. Those who are not truly useful to society or are a burden on it. The rest will recover, but no one will dare to rise against a government that has managed the crisis so well.

General – This epidemic will ensure national harmony and social peace for at least a decade. You will be remembered in history as the saviour of the nation.

Minister – People will already be so grateful to recover their health. They will be willing to work twice as hard to get the country back on track. And they will willingly give up all their undeserved privileges.

General – In times of crisis, we used to say: what we need is a good war. Today, I tell you, Your Majesty: what we need is a good epidemic.

King – This is a serious decision. I need to think about it...

Minister – Of course, Your Majesty. But remember, time is running out...

The minister and the general leave. The king remains thoughtful, then exits as well. The princess and the leader come out of hiding. They look devastated and remain silent for a moment.

Leader – They have gone mad...

Princess – The king hasn't said yes yet.

Leader – He will say yes. He is willing to do anything to keep his throne... It's a matter of life or death for him now. And it's also become that for us.

Princess – And for our people.

Leader – The time has come to act.

Princess – Yes... But how do we stop this monstrous plan?

The leader ponders.

Leader – If we tell this story, no one will believe us. Newspapers will be seized. We will be thrown in jail. Or worse...

Princess – Then it's up to me. My father wouldn't dare kill me.

Leader – Are you sure?

Princess – We have no choice.

Leader – What are you willing to do to spare the country from this genocide?

Princess – I am ready to sacrifice myself.

Leader – Could you kill him?

Princess – You can't ask me to do that...

Leader – Brutus helped assassinate Julius Caesar to stop him becoming king.

Princess – And what did that achieve? Rome ended up with another dictator.

Leader – Then I will take care of it.

Princess – If you love me, don't do that.

Leader – Even if millions of lives are at stake?

Princess – If you use the same methods as the tyrant, you will soon become a dictator yourself. You will just take his place. And in a few years, someone else will come to overthrow you.

Thoughtfully, the leader sees the chessboard, approaches it, and moves a piece.

Leader – It's a game of chess. And on the political chessboard, one side always has to defeat the other.

Princess – So that in the end, only one king remains. Not hesitating to sacrifice pawns to win the game.

Leader – So that white wins over black... Good against evil.

Princess – But chess has nothing to do with good or evil. Black and white are interchangeable. You simply draw lots at the start to decide who makes the first move.

Leader – It's the game of power.

Princess – It's an absurd game. The instant you defeat your opponent, the game ends. And the only thing left is the prospect of a rematch. Unless we change the rules, the fighting will never stop.

Leader – But if we spare your father's life, he will be the one to kill me.

Princess – I won't let him do that.

Leader – And if you had to choose between my life and his?

Princess – If I have to choose between his life and the lives of millions, I'll do what I have to do.

The princess and the leader exit. The queen enters, accompanied by the butler.

Queen – It's absolutely dreadful! People no longer have any respect. How is this possible?

Butler – I don't know, Your Majesty. A few of those terrorists, more determined than the others, managed to get into the palace. Before being pushed back by our security service, they managed to enter your apartments and ransack them. They left, taking everything they found in Your Majesty's dressing room.

Queen – All my purchases from London... Not to mention my two thousand pairs of shoes! Look at me. I've been reduced to walking barefoot!

Butler – I'll fetch Your Majesty a pair of mules at once.

Queen – Mules? What on earth would I do with two mules? We haven't even decided to flee the country! And if we did, we'd take the jet, not ride away on a mule!

Butler – I meant the shoes, Your Majesty. A pair of slippers...

The king enters.

King – Please leave us. (*The butler exits.*) Are you not injured, at least? And the princess as well?

Queen – No, but I'm afraid. This farce is turning into a tragedy. How will all of this end?

King – If I were the author of this sinister comedy, I could tell you. Alas, I don't know any more than you do. And I'm not even sure if the author himself knows how to end this absurd story.

Queen – So what are you going to do?

King – I'm going to take the necessary decisions, I promise you, to restore order in this country.

The minister and the general return.

Minister – Your Majesty. Madam...

King – I will ask you to leave us. Duty calls...

Queen – Be firm, my dear. Remember what your father always used to say at times like these...

King – Really? And what did he say?

Queen – Right now, I can't remember... I'm so upset by all this... But I'm sure it was very appropriate. And you should always follow your parents' advice. Gentlemen...

The queen exits.

Minister – There is no time for hesitation, Your Majesty. As you can see, the situation is on the verge of slipping away from us.

King – Is your plan operational now?

General – Everything is ready, Your Majesty. We're just waiting for your green light.

King – How are you going to spread this disease?

General – It's an airborne virus. We'll introduce it into the air-conditioning systems of public buildings, railway stations, schools, churches, sex shops, swingers' clubs...

Minister – This virus is highly contagious. The epidemic will spread like wildfire.

King – And will the whole population be affected?

General – That isn't the point. We want to create widespread panic. People will accept almost any restriction to protect themselves. They'll turn to the government and the army for protection.

King – But not everyone will die, right?

General – Only the weakest, as I told you. The elderly. Those who are already weakened by other illnesses. The younger and stronger ones will survive.

Minister – We still need to keep some of them healthy so they can continue to work to make us richer.

King – What guarantee do we have that the epidemic will remain under control?

The general produces a vial.

General – This, Your Majesty.

King – This?

Minister – It's the vaccine. We have tested it. It is perfectly effective.

Silence.

General – What is your decision, Your Majesty?

The king pretends to hesitate for a moment.

King – You have my approval.

Minister – This is a grave decision, Your Majesty, for which the entire political and military leadership must share responsibility. I've taken the liberty of drafting an official order.

King – Then why put it in writing?

General – Let's just say... it will be a sort of life insurance for us. Proof that we did not unleash this epidemic on our own, but that it was a collective decision made at the highest level of the state, and that you personally also assume responsibility.

The minister presents the document to the king and offers him a pen. The king looks at both of them, wary, then signs. He then displays the document to the public in a manner reminiscent of Donald Trump. The minister takes back the document.

Minister – Very well, Your Majesty. We will vaccinate you immediately.

King – You? You know very well that I have a deep aversion to injections, and you're not a nurse...

General – Don't worry, Your Majesty. We will administer this vaccine anally.

King – Pardon...?

Minister – By mouth... The General meant by mouth, of course. An oral vaccine, Your Majesty.

The general holds out several pills in his open palm to the king. The king recoils.

King – Are you not trying to poison me, by any chance?

General – There are three pills here. Choose yours, and we will swallow the other two.

The king cautiously selects a pill. The general and the minister each take one of the remaining pills and swallow them. The king, in turn, places the pill on his tongue, but he is so tense that he swallows it the wrong way and chokes. Under the horrified gaze of the other two, he starts coughing loudly.

King – Water, water...

The minister grabs the bell and shakes it. The king continues to cough and choke. The chambermaid enters.

General – A glass of water, quickly!

Chambermaid – Yes, sir, right away, sir...

The chambermaid rushes out, panicked. The king continues to choke. The chambermaid returns with a glass of water, which she hands to the king. He grabs it and drinks eagerly. But he continues to choke. The chambermaid then stands behind him, places her hands on his stomach, and performs a series of thrusts like in the Heimlich manoeuvre, recommended in case of choking. This ambiguous movement, however, can evoke a penetration from behind, and the others present are taken aback.

Chambermaid – I've seen it done on TV. It's what doctors recommend to help someone who's choking...

The king coughs again, then begins to catch his breath.

Minister – Are you feeling better, Your Majesty?

King – Yes... It feels good... (*He looks at the chambermaid with gratitude*.) Thank you, my dear.

General – You scared us...

The chambermaid is still there, but nobody pays attention to her anymore.

King – I hope this isn't a bad omen... Your virus is supposed to poison the people, and I almost choked while swallowing the vaccine... Do you really think it will work?

Minister – I'm sure it will, Your Majesty.

General – Tomorrow, you will be fit as a fiddle and fully immunised.

Minister – While all your opponents will be struck by this virus.

King – May God hear you... or rather, the devil.

The king exits, supported by the chambermaid, who overheard the end of the conversation.

General – Are you sure we're not doing something stupid? All to save the head of this idiot, who can't even swallow a pill without choking.

Minister – Don't worry, General. We are the ones who will keep control of this vaccine. It will only be effective for a year at the most. By the time the virus mutates, those who want to remain immune will have to go through us, and the king will be nothing more than a puppet in our hands. If he doesn't want to die as well, he will have to do what we tell him.

General – And what if things go wrong?

Minister – We will release this document... that he didn't even bother to read, which holds him fully responsible for this genocide.

General – You are the devil incarnate. (*He approaches her*.) But a devil in the body of a mermaid. And I fear that I, too, have already succumbed to your song...

Minister (*seductively*) – How far are you willing to follow me, General?

The general embraces her.

General – I'll follow you all the way to hell if I have to, as long as there's a royal suite there to shelter our love...

They kiss. She turns to the throne.

Minister – Tomorrow, it will be me sitting on this throne. And I will make you my king.

General – At least a consort king. But I gladly leave you the crown, as long as you give me a slice of the cake.

Minister – We'll have a good slice, I promise you.

General – I will make sure of it... I have kept documents as well, binding the two of us together more closely than a marriage contract.

Minister – I can see that you trust me.

General – Don't take me for more naive than I am. But I admit that your talent as a persuasive speaker served us well in convincing the king. What an actress you would have been! Have you ever considered acting?

Minister – Perhaps I haven't said my last word yet.

They leave. The king returns and sits in front of the chessboard, lost in thought. The princess arrives.

Princess – The chambermaid told me you had a choking incident.

King – Indeed, I'm not sure if I chose the right path... and I hope this decision won't leave a bitter taste in my mouth.

Princess – I came to see if all was well.

King – I'm feeling better, thank you.

The princess notices the chessboard.

Princess – You still haven't found a suitable opponent?

King – No one wants to play with me anymore, I don't know why...

Princess – They're afraid.

King – Afraid of losing?

Princess – Or afraid of winning...

King – Would you like to play a game?

Princess – Are you sure?

King – The last time we played together, you were still a child.

Princess – You beat me every time.

She sits opposite him on the other side of the chessboard. He takes one pawn in each hand, puts his hands behind his back, and then presents her with his closed hands.

King – White begins.

She points to one of her father's hands, and he opens his palm. A white pawn appears.

Princess – Then I'll go first.

She moves a piece. The king moves another.

King – Why don't we play together anymore?

Princess – As children grow up, they tend to drift away from their parents.

King – Were you afraid I would beat you?

Princess – Or perhaps I was afraid of winning.

They move a few pieces in turn.

King – I don't like playing with the black pieces.

Princess – Yet black and white are simply two sides of the same game.

King – Black frightens me. It reminds me of the dark... When you were little, you were afraid of the dark too.

Princess – And you weren't often there to reassure me...

King – I regret it sometimes, believe me. But we can't change the past.

She moves one last piece.

Princess – And there we are... Checkmate.

King – Beaten in four moves. I'd forgotten that little trick.

Princess – Or maybe you let me win.

King – And you let me lose...

Princess – Are you going to kill me too?

King – Do you believe I could?

They exchange a glance full of implications. She exits. The king sweeps the remaining pieces off the chessboard with a sweep of his hand. The minister arrives with the leader of the opposition, who looks intrigued at the chessboard.

Leader – Your Majesty...

The king regains composure and suddenly becomes excessively amiable.

King – Please, have a seat, dear friend, I insist.

Leader – If you don't mind, I prefer to stand.

King – Would you at least like a refreshment or a hot drink?

Leader – No, thank you, I'm not thirsty. And I didn't come here for tea.

The king tries to joke.

King – You're not worried about being poisoned, are you?

The minister gives him a reproachful look.

Leader – You wished to see me. I'm listening.

Minister – The king agrees to hold free elections as soon as possible.

King – I undertake to do so, and I shall personally see to it that the elections take place under the best possible conditions.

Leader – That's quite reassuring... I'll take note of it and inform all those who have chosen me to represent them.

King – I gather you will be a candidate then?

Leader – The people need a new leader.

Minister – You've quickly adopted our military language. Take care you don't end up a dictator yourself...

Leader – So you're that certain I'll win?

King – The people have already made up their minds. They want change. My only concern is to ensure a peaceful transition, without needlessly shedding the precious blood of our fellow citizens.

Leader – Your concern honours you, but it's rather late. For years, you've spilled the blood of your opponents to stay on the throne. What makes you now renounce power?

King – No dictator, no matter how bloodthirsty, can remain at the head of state for ever without the support of the people.

Leader – We will do everything to ensure a peaceful transition.

Minister – Including guaranteeing an honourable exit for our king and his most loyal supporters?

Leader (*ironically*) – Honourable?

Minister – Let's say acceptable, then.

Leader – We are not driven by a sense of revenge, but by a thirst for justice.

Minister – Depending on whose hand holds the scales, justice can easily become revenge. Please be more specific.

Leader – It is the restoration of social justice that we want. We agree to a general amnesty regarding past crimes.

King – Very well. In that case, I'll leave it to the Minister to work out the details of this agreement with you later and organise the election. We shall meet again soon...

The king exits. The minister and the leader exchange a challenging glance.

Leader – You suddenly seem very conciliatory... What trap could this be hiding?

Minister – The king has grown old, that's all. He's looking for a way out. But he wants to protect himself, that's normal.

Leader – And what about you? What game are you playing?

Minister – Perhaps chess.

Leader – In that game, we all stand to lose a lot.

Minister – We could come to an agreement to avoid that.

Leader – I thought that's what we just did...

Minister – It's a dangerous bargain and you know it. If you take power, you won't be able to let the royal family and its friends live happily ever after at the taxpayers' expense. The people will demand revenge. I don't trust the people...

Leader – What do you propose, then?

Minister – If the country were to experience a crisis, you could take part in a national unity government.

Leader – Do you have reason to believe that the country will face a crisis even more severe than the one we're already going through?

Minister – These are troubled times. And the king is a man of the past. I'll let you think about it...

The minister exits. The princess enters.

Princess – You seem to get along quite well after all... What did she want?

Leader – To ask me to join the government...

Princess – She's the cleverest of the bunch, and therefore dangerous. She's the one to watch out for.

Leader – Has the king made his decision?

Princess – They have launched the operation...

Leader – How can you be sure?

Princess – I have my informants too...

Leader – I suspected it... Otherwise, they wouldn't have been so accommodating.

Princess – It doesn't seem to worry you...

Leader – I have a plan...

Princess – A plan?

Leader – It's too early to tell you.

Princess – So, you don't trust me anymore?

Leader – Let's just say... I don't want to put you in an embarrassing situation, but you'll find out soon enough...

Princess – In the meantime, thousands of people could die.

Leader – Not if my plan succeeds... Let's not stay here.

They exit. The king returns, accompanied by the chambermaid.

King – You saved my life earlier, my dear. Why did you do that? Don't you wish for my death, like everyone else in this kingdom?

Chambermaid – I wasn't thinking, Your Majesty. It was a reflex. When you see a dog drown, you forget for a moment that it has bitten you.

King – Regardless, I am not ungrateful, and I will remember what you did...

Chambermaid – Your Royal Highness is too kind.

King – I consider that I owe you my life. It is a debt of honour.

Chambermaid – Thank you, Your Majesty.

King – Did you hear what we were saying when you were there?

Chambermaid – I don't make a habit of listening to conversations that are not meant for me, Your Majesty.

King – For having overheard that conversation, I should have killed you. I spare your life. Consider us even.

Chambermaid – Very well, Your Majesty.

The king looks at the chessboard.

King – Do you want to play?

Chambermaid – I'm not sure...

King – That's an order.

Chambermaid – In that case...

King – It's your turn to start. But I'll play with the white pieces.

The chambermaid makes the opening move. The king moves another piece, and so on. The king captures several pieces in succession.

Chambermaid – Your knights are in great shape, Your Majesty... They jump much farther than mine...

King – Are you insinuating that I cheat?

Chambermaid – Not at all, Your Majesty!

King – It's your move.

She moves a rook, which the king captures.

Chambermaid – I've lost my second rook.

King – Focus, my dear. Look, I'm also capturing your queen.

Chambermaid – Your Majesty plays too well for me. I'd better give up...

King – No. We must continue until the end. You still have a bishop in addition to your king.

Chambermaid – Alright, I'll be more careful.

The king also captures the last bishop.

King – As long as you have a pawn left, nothing is lost yet.

Chambermaid – That's true...

King – And there you go, I also capture your pawn.

Chambermaid – This time my king is left alone and defenceless.

King – But you're not in checkmate yet!

Chambermaid – I have no chance of winning anymore.

King – No... But you have to keep going until the end... You mustn't deprive the winner of the pleasure of the kill. Imagine that in a bullfight, the race is stopped as soon as the bull has shed its first drop of blood...

Chambermaid – Very well... let's continue then.

King – And that's it. This time it's over. Checkmate.

Chambermaid – Your Majesty really plays too well against me. He'd better find a worthy opponent.

King – The surest way not to be defeated, my dear, is to discourage all your opponents from challenging you...

Chambermaid – And if they dare to defy you anyway...?

King – In that case, there's only one solution left.

Chambermaid – I would be curious to know it.

King – If someone snatches victory from you by surprise, you change the rules of the game afterwards to disqualify them.

The king exits. The chambermaid puts away the chess set. The butler arrives.

Butler – Ah, you also had a game of chess, I see...

Chambermaid – Yes...

Butler – Not easy to play against a real king, is it?

Chambermaid – No, indeed... Because he plays for his own life. But he plays so poorly... even when cheating. I thought I would never manage to let him win...

Blackout.

ACT 3

As at the beginning of the first act, the king, seated on his throne, reads the newspaper, which this time headlines the epidemic: the contagion is spreading, hospitals are overwhelmed, there is a shortage of toilet paper... The chambermaid enters, wearing a mask. On the coffee table, the remnants of a breakfast tray.

Chambermaid – May I clear Your Majesty's breakfast?

King – Please, dear...

The chambermaid takes hold of the tray.

Chambermaid – I see that Your Majesty has regained his appetite.

King – Pardon?

Chambermaid *(louder)* – Your continental breakfast! Your Majesty has eaten everything...

King – I'm already a little deaf, so with this mask... We should consider making a hole for the mouth, because I can barely understand you.

Chambermaid – I'm just following the sanitary guidelines, Your Majesty. To prevent this terrible disease that is ravaging the country from spreading to the palace as well.

King – Ah, yes... The disease, of course...

Chambermaid – Anyway, I'm glad to see that Your Majesty is in perfect health.

King – That's true. Some time ago, I was considering hanging myself, but this epidemic has lifted my spirits...

Chambermaid – The misfortune of some brings joy to others...

The butler arrives, also wearing a mask.

Butler – Your Majesty, the Minister is here with the General, and they would like to see Your Majesty if you are available.

King – Let them in... But try to articulate as well. And make shorter sentences. Because with these bloody masks...

Butler – Very well, Your Majesty.

The Minister and the General enter. The butler and the chambermaid exit.

Minister – Good morning, Your Majesty. Have you read the press?

King – Yes... *(With a big smile)* It's a real tragedy...

Minister – The disease is spreading... There's panic... People are staying holed up in their homes, afraid of being infected...

King – At least they're not outside my windows screaming that they want to see me hanged.

General – There's no danger of that now, Your Majesty. We took immediate steps to contain the epidemic. Martial law has been declared and the borders are closed...

King – Do you think that will be enough to restore our reputation?

Minister – It's a start. But according to an initial poll, your popularity rating has already jumped twenty points after your speech.

King – Yes, I think I did well enough, didn't I?

Minister – I loved it when you said, "We are at war against an invisible enemy."

King – You wrote that speech, didn't you?

Minister – Oh yes, that's true...

King – Well... And now, what do we do?

General – We wait a few days, and we cancel the elections that were scheduled, citing this exceptional health situation.

King – And the vaccine?

Minister – We're going to wait a little while before announcing that our laboratories have discovered it. It has to be credible.

General – The longer we wait, the more people will fear for their lives. And the more grateful they will be to us for finding the cure for this terrible epidemic.

King – For now, according to the newspaper, they're mostly afraid of running out of toilet paper...

Minister – The disease starts with diarrhoea, indeed.

King – Diarrhoea? And you think that will be enough to create panic?

General – According to our experts, there should be a few serious cases. Enough to overwhelm hospitals and trigger mass panic.

King – And are you sure the vaccine is effective?

General – One hundred percent.

King – What about my wife? And my daughter?

Minister – Rest assured, we administered the vaccine to them without their knowledge.

King – Very well. Indeed, I prefer that they don't know anything. Especially my daughter... I'm not sure she would approve of my decision... You're a mother too, you know how young people are at that age. Still full of illusions.

Minister – I don't have children, Your Majesty.

King – You're lucky. And what about you, General?

General – Not yet, Your Majesty.

King – Not yet...? But how old are you?

The Minister deems it appropriate to get back to the essentials.

Minister – I have summoned the leader of the opposition, Your Majesty, to discuss a ceasefire and postponement of the elections. He will be here in a moment.

King – Perfect... Do you think we could sway him to our side? In exchange for a hefty transfer to an offshore account and a ministerial position in a national unity government.

Minister – I'm not sure, Your Majesty... I've discreetly sounded him out, but he's incorruptible, unfortunately... An idealist...

General – And a dangerous leftist...

King – We could make him understand that it's either that or prison. Even ideologues are capable of understanding that, aren't they?

Minister – I don't know, Your Majesty. And besides...

King – Besides what?

Minister – Has Your Majesty really not heard?

King – Aware of what?

Minister – He's the Princess's lover, Your Majesty.

King – Whose lover?

Minister – Your daughter.

King – My daughter's lover? No...?

Minister – Yes, Majesty, I'm afraid so...

King – How do you know? Were you aware, General?

General – Everyone knows, Your Majesty.

King – Everyone except me...

General – These are things that fathers don't always want to see.

The king realises all the implications of this news.

King – And what if I have him executed?

General – Your daughter would probably resent you for a while, but...

King – Of course, I can't displease the princess...

Minister – It's a delicate matter indeed, requiring a certain tact...

King – You're right... What if they tie the knot?

General – Hanging? Rather than a firing squad? If Your Majesty thinks it's a gentler death... especially for his own daughter.

King – No, you fool! It's a popular expression! What if we marry them?

Minister – Marry them? And for what purpose?

King – To neutralise them both! He would lose all credibility in the eyes of the opposition, and she... How can you continue to plot against a father who grants you the hand of the man you love, when he's his own worst enemy?

General – Indeed, when you put it like that...

King – A marriage between the king's daughter and the leader of the opposition is even better than a national unity government, isn't it?

Minister – In any case, I've summoned him to the palace to explain the situation to him, so that we can agree together on the measures to be taken...

King – Of course, of course... Does her mother know as well?

Minister – Her mother...?

King – The queen! My wife! The princess's mother! Is she aware of this love affair?

Minister – I believe she must suspect it, but...

King – Ah, here she comes...

Minister – See you later, Your Majesty.

General – Your Majesty...

The queen arrives. The minister and the general exit.

Queen – What is this farce? The butler and the chambermaid are wearing masks now! Are we living in some sort of masked comedy?

King – It's an epidemic, my dear. A terrible epidemic. They wear masks to prevent infecting you.

Queen – And what about us? Aren't we wearing masks?

King – Don't worry, we've been vaccinated...

Queen – Oh really?

King – I mean, we are safe here in the palace. Whereas the staff, they are in contact with the outside world. So, they wear masks to prevent their droplets from landing on us, like some actors spitting on the front-row audience.

Queen – And is that all you plan to do to fight this scourge? Muzzle the butler and the maid to stop them from drooling?

King – For now, there is nothing else we can do... We're confined to the palace until our researchers find a vaccine against this dreadful disease. They are working on it day and night, I assure you...

Queen – Confined? That's terrible! I'd planned to have my hair done! I haven't been for at least three days. Just look at me! My hair's a complete mess...

King – I'm afraid you'll have to wait a little longer. But tell me, my dear... did you know that our princess is having an affair with the leader of the opposition?

Queen – You mean that handsome young man I met yesterday at the palace?

King – So, you knew about it...

Queen – Mothers sense these things, you know...

King – Why don't we get them married? There's nothing like a royal wedding to restore the reputation of a bankrupt monarchy, is there?

Queen – A royal wedding? During an epidemic? Are you out of your mind?

King – That's right, I'd forgotten... In fact, I'm beginning to wonder whether this epidemic was such a good idea... When everything could have been sorted out by a wedding, like in the fairy tales...

Queen – An idea? What do you mean, an idea...

King – Sorry, I meant... Yes, you're right, it would be best to wait until this epidemic is under control to celebrate their wedding, of course... Besides, we have banned all weddings and funerals until further notice to prevent the spread.

Queen – Funerals too? My God, what era are we living in... The fridges of all those poor people were already empty, now they will fill up the morgue's fridges while waiting for permission to be buried. Well, I'll leave you... I don't know what's wrong with me... I think I have a bit of a stomach ache... With all these emotions...

King – Of course... (*Thoughtfully, to himself*) I thought she was vaccinated too...

Queen – I won't kiss you...

King – No, indeed, it's safer that way.

The queen exits. The butler returns, still wearing a mask.

Butler – Your Majesty, the Minister is here with... a gentleman. They wish to know if Your Majesty can be seen.

King – Can be seen? What nonsense! Besides, I specifically asked the staff to keep their sentences short when they're wearing these blasted masks...

Butler – I apologise, Your Majesty.

King – Visible? Can't you see I'm here? You can see me, can't you?

Butler – Yes, Your Majesty.

King – So, I am not the invisible man, am I?

Butler – No, Your Majesty.

King – Speaking of seeing and not seeing, my good man, did you know that my daughter is having an affair with... this gentleman, as you call him?

Butler – Your Majesty, my position leads me to see many things, without being able to say that I have seen them, to hear many things, without being able to say that I have heard them, and to know many things, without being able to say that I know them.

King – It's a good thing I asked you to keep your sentences short...

Butler – Very well, Your Majesty.

The butler exits. The minister returns with the leader. The King is surprisingly friendly.

King – Good morning, sir. Welcome to our humble palace.

Leader – Thank you...

King – But it's perfectly normal. This is your home, because this palace is first and foremost the people's palace, isn't it, Minister?

Minister – Um... Yes, in a way.

King – Sir, I'm listening...

Leader – Sorry...?

King – Did you want to ask me something, perhaps?

A moment of hesitation.

Minister – No, Your Majesty, we were the ones who asked to see this gentleman to discuss...

King – Ah yes, of course... In view of the new challenges facing our nation, I...

The minister prefers to take over.

Minister – As you know, our country is currently going through an unprecedented crisis.

King – We are at war... against an invisible enemy.

Leader – Don't overdo it, though...

King – Regardless, you will understand that the time is no longer for free elections, as I personally committed myself to.

Minister – It's rather a time for unity behind our sovereign and the brave fighters of our healthcare system.

King – Not to mention our garbage collectors and especially our sewage workers... Because with this wave of diarrhoea, septic tanks and sewers are overflowing.

Minister – We even face a shortage of toilet paper, which we used to import but now sorely lack since the borders are closed.

King – In short, we are in deep shit. In the literal and figurative sense.

Minister – If that can still be called a figure of speech.

King – To paraphrase an old statesman, I can promise you nothing but blood, sweat and tears... and above all, a great deal of shit.

Minister – For now, everyone is under house arrest...

King – I would even say that all the inhabitants of this country are invited to stay on their thrones in their bathrooms. In a certain sense, making all these idiots equal to kings and ministers... But also risking a new kind of overflow, which we will try to contain as much as possible...

Minister – That's why we propose to postpone these elections. And we would like to know your position on this matter. Can we count on your support?

A pause.

Leader – I am fully aware of the seriousness of this unprecedented crisis. And I am not opposed to postponing the elections.

King – Thank you. I knew I could rely on your sense of responsibility and statecraft.

Leader – What do you plan to do to fight this epidemic and overcome it?

Minister – Our researchers are working hard to find a vaccine. As leader of the opposition, we will of course keep you informed of developments, hour by hour.

Leader – Very well. I am at your disposal. If there's anything I can do for my country...

King – I expected nothing less from you, my dear friend... As another great statesman, whose name I have also forgotten, said: don't ask yourself what you can do for your country, ask yourself what your country can do for you.

Minister – With all due respect, Your Majesty, I believe it's rather the opposite.

King – Of course... Dear Sir, if you have anything else to ask me, like my daughter's hand in marriage, for example, now is the time.

Leader – I... I will think about it, I promise...

The leader departs.

King – Charming young man...

Minister – Well, you see, our plan is working perfectly.

King – I was hoping he would take the opportunity to ask for the princess's hand... I did everything I could to discreetly offer him the opportunity, but he didn't want to take it.

Minister – Yes, indeed, very discreetly... And... are you that keen on this marriage?

King – It would be life insurance! It's much harder to have a dictator executed when it's your father-in-law. Even if many sons-in-law would dream of having their mother-in-law executed...

They exit. The princess returns with the leader.

Princess – So, you're giving up on the elections! You're falling into their trap!

Leader – It's just a stratagem to buy time. Besides, it's impossible to mobilise the people at the moment. They're too afraid for their health, and they're flocking into the arms of the tyrant they wanted to overthrow just a week ago. I'm sorry to tell you, my dear, but people are idiots...

Princess – The people? We're talking about the people! The people we're fighting for!

Leader – But the people are the people! And the people are idiots...

Princess – Maybe, but these idiots are likely to die in their millions before the madmen who govern us decide to come up with a vaccine.

Leader – Rest assured, no one will die. Not immediately, at least.

Princess – How can you be so sure?

Leader – I made sure that instead of this dangerous virus, a harmless version was spread among the population.

Princess – How did you achieve that miracle? Are you turning water into wine now? And do you know how to mutate a virus to make it benign?

Leader – I contacted the scientists at the laboratory working on this research programme. Fortunately, we have supporters everywhere. They know the tide is turning, and they don't want to risk being associated with a planned genocide.

Princess – A harmless version? Are you sure?

Leader – That's what they told me...

Princess – Yet people are getting sick.

Leader – It's nothing more than a bout of diarrhoea. We still had to make the epidemic look real, without arousing the authorities' suspicions.

Princess – And now, what do we do?

Leader – We wait for the people to recover from their diarrhoea, for them to realise that this disease is not serious, and then we mobilise the population to overthrow the tyrant.

Princess – Let's hope everything goes as planned... In the meantime, let's remain discreet. My father absolutely must continue to be oblivious to our affair.

Leader – I wonder if he suspects something after all...

Princess – What makes you say that?

Leader – I don't know... A gut feeling... Now I must go...

Princess – Be careful...

They kiss, and he exits. The chambermaid arrives.

Princess – So, were you able to find out anything else?

Chambermaid – I think your father knows.

Princess – Knows?

Chambermaid – About you and...

Princess – My God... How did he find out?

Chambermaid – His minister is informed about everything by the butler.

Princess – And how did my father react?

Chambermaid – Strangely, he doesn't seem opposed to this union.

The butler arrives with a conspiratorial air, interrupting the conversation. He pretends to tidy up the room but appears to be spying on them.

Princess (*to the chambermaid*) – Please accompany me to my chambers... Here, the walls have ears...

The princess exits with the chambermaid, under the suspicious gaze of the butler. He rearranges the chess pieces. The king returns.

Butler – I took advantage of Your Majesty's absence to restore some order...

King – In the end, we have a somewhat similar occupation, you and I.

Butler – Pardon?

King – I, too, am trying to restore some order to this country.

Butler – Of course, Your Majesty.

King – Sometimes I wonder if I wouldn't prefer to be in your shoes. *(The butler looks at him astonished but doesn't dare to reply.)* And you, my good man? How would you like to be king?

Butler – Well, Your Majesty...

The king gestures towards the throne.

King – Here, take a seat there.

Butler – Well, Your Majesty...

King – That's an order. *(Reluctantly, the butler sits on the throne.)* So, what are your impressions?

Butler – Good Lord... It's not very cushioned.

King – Exactly! You thought it was a comfortable seat? Well, no! It's a pain in the arse, on this throne, you see!

Butler – It would probably be better with a small cushion.

King – Would Your Majesty like a cushion to make the throne more comfortable?

Butler – Well... if it's not too much to ask...

The king takes a cushion. The butler lifts himself slightly, and the king slips the cushion under his buttocks.

King – Is that better?

Butler – It's perfect.

King – Now that Your Majesty is comfortably seated... how do you propose to restore order to the country?

Butler – Do you really want my opinion?

King – Please, Your Highness.

Butler – I think we should start by executing the chambermaid.

King – Really? And why is that?

Butler – Because she's a spy!

King – And who does she work for?

Butler – She works for the princess, who, as you know, has no secrets from the leader of the opposition, since he is her lover.

King – I see... And what about her butler? Does Your Highness have any information about him? Isn't he a spy too?

Butler – He is a spy indeed.

King – And who does he work for?

Butler – Don't tell me you don't know?

King – I don't know.

Butler – He works for the minister, who, in turn, has no secrets from the general, her lover, and the two of them are secretly plotting against the king.

King – So, in your opinion, we should execute the butler, the chambermaid, the minister, the general, my daughter, and the leader of the opposition...

Butler – Absolutely.

King – And the queen?

Butler – The queen as well, of course.

King – Is she plotting against the king too?

Butler – No... She's far too foolish for that...

King – Then why execute her?

Butler – I believe it would be a relief for everyone, don't you think?

King – Thank you for your advice, Your Highness... *(Suddenly changing his tone.)* Now get out before I strangle you with my bare hands.

The butler snaps back to reality and cautiously rises from the throne to exit.

Butler – Does Your Majesty desire anything else?

King – Go hang yourself...

The butler exits. The king stands in front of the chessboard and starts playing a game of chess with himself.

King – No one dares to challenge me anymore... I'm reduced to playing alone... *(He moves a piece, then moves to the other side of the chessboard to move another, and so on.)* There you have it! *(Triumphantly)* Checkmate! The problem with playing against yourself is that in the end, you never know who truly won...

The minister and the general arrive.

Minister – I have good news and bad news, Your Majesty.

King – Spare me these worn-out formulas, please. Honestly! Nowadays, no author dares to write dialogues like that anymore!

Minister – Sorry, Your Majesty. I was just trying to create a bit of suspense...

King – Fine... Start with the bad news then.

Minister – Things aren't going exactly as planned.

King – Well, strangely enough, that doesn't surprise me... Your plan was so rotten. What's wrong?

General – It seems that the virus has mutated.

King – And that's bad news?

General – It means that the vaccine we developed and administered to you is not effective against this new form of the virus...

King – Bravo... And what's the good news?

General – The new virus is much milder than the previous one. People don't die. They just have a few intestinal problems.

King – How is that good news?

Minister – People may not die, but the psychological effects are still working in Your Majesty's favour. Everyone is counting on us to end this epidemic of diarrhoea, harmless though it may be. It is certainly causing them plenty of trouble.

King – So they'll support a dictator just because he promises to cure their diarrhoea?

Minister – People are paranoid, what can you do? The more we tell them this disease is benign, the more they will think we're hiding something more serious...

King – It's all getting a bit complicated...

Minister – In any case, of course, we'll have to find a new vaccine as soon as possible.

King – A new vaccine?

Minister – As I said, since it's a new virus, the old vaccine is no longer effective.

King – So, we might be infected too? I think the queen is already affected, and I myself have a bit of a stomachache...

General – Our researchers are on it. In the meantime, we'll need to be very cautious...

King – I will have you executed.

General – But then you won't have any chance of finding a vaccine.

King – Fine, then I'll have you executed when you've found a vaccine.

Minister – It's not over yet, Your Majesty, I assure you... Listen! The protests have resumed in the streets.

King – And you think that's something to celebrate?

Minister – Listen to the crowd, Your Majesty! "Long live our beloved king!" "May the king protect us!" "More toilet paper!"

King – Well, yes, you're right... It's a triumph! I will make an appearance on the balcony...

General – Are you sure about that?

The king exits.

Minister – What the hell have you done?

General – I don't understand... This is not at all what was planned...

Minister – And now the King thinks he's a holy man. He's going out onto the balcony to bless the crowd. We'd better see what he's doing...

General – You're right, it's better to keep an eye on him. If he starts thinking he can perform miracles as well...

They exit. The princess and the leader return.

Princess – It's incredible. The side effect of this virus seems to turn all the king's subjects into willing slaves.

Leader – Psychologists have a name for it.

Princess – Really?

Leader – People can begin to identify with their captors. Shut them up for long enough, and eventually they start loving the people who keep the keys.

Princess – I see... People were so scared that they're willing to believe anything and anyone. And it makes them uncritical fools...

Leader – Someone once described the perfect dictatorship as a democracy in appearance only: a prison without walls, whose inmates have no wish to escape. Keep them entertained and buying things, and they'll even learn to love their chains.

Princess – Indeed, it's even worse than a military dictatorship.

Leader – Because it's much more effective...

Princess – We're truly screwed...

Leader – Well, in a way... gullible voters and docile citizens, that's what every politician dreams of, right?

Princess – Don't even think about it. If it means turning you into another dictator, I'll refuse to be your wife...

Leader – Of course, my dear... I was just kidding, obviously.

The minister returns with the king.

Minister – Perhaps you shouldn't have gone into the crowd, Your Majesty. I remind you that you're no longer protected by the vaccine, and this disease is highly contagious...

King – It's been so long since people cheered me like that... You should have seen them, Princess. A standing ovation!

Princess – I need to talk to you, Father.

King – I'm listening, my child. After all, one should always listen to their children...

Princess – Maybe it's still possible to stop all this.

King – You're right, my daughter. I don't want to be like a boxer who fights one bout too many, or a singer who keeps making comebacks after a farewell tour. I'd rather leave while I'm still on top. I've decided to abdicate in your favour.

The princess is surprised and speechless.

Minister – Don't listen to him, he's clearly been infected by the prevailing idiocy during his public appearance.

King – Silence! And by the way, you're dismissed.

General – But Your Majesty...

King – You too, General.

Minister – I beg Your Majesty to think carefully before...

King – I've made up my mind. Both of you bow down before your new Queen.

The minister and the general hesitate for a moment but find it wiser to bow.

Minister – Your Majesty.

General – Your Majesty.

Minister – From now on, we will serve you with the same loyalty we served your father.

Princess – That's quite reassuring, indeed. Father, do I also have the right to choose my king?

King – Of course... You're the queen now.

Leader – In that case, it's up to me to ask for your daughter's hand.

King – I'm happy to grant it.

Princess – So, it was as simple as that?

King – I want nothing more than my daughter's happiness... and the happiness of my people. Come, let's announce the news to your mother... Follow us, young man. You're a bit like my son now...

The king, the princess, and the leader exit. The minister and the general are left stunned.

Minister – I think the situation is slipping away from us...

General – I never believed in this epidemic story.

Minister – You have some nerve... It was your idea!

General – And now, what do we do?

Minister – I don't know... I've always wanted to act in the theatre. Maybe this is the moment to change my life.

General – The right time? All the theatres are closed because of the epidemic!

Minister – We'll perform outdoors, like Molière and his troupe in their early days! We'll go from town to town, putting on plays wherever we find a stage!

General – We?

Minister – You said you could follow me to hell, didn't you?

General – From there to becoming an actor... And besides, you've never done theatre, and neither have I!

Minister – Believe me, General, when you've been in politics, you're already an actor.

General – After all, you're right. And what kind of theatre will we do?

Minister – General, when politicians are all actors, it's high time actors got involved in politics.

Fade to black.

Epilogue

The princess, now queen, sits on the throne with a crown on her head. She reads a newspaper announcing her forthcoming coronation and the elections now under way. The headlines read: "King Abdicates in Favour of Daughter" and "Free Elections at Last". She nervously rings the bell. The butler arrives.

Butler – Your Majesty?

Princess – This waiting is really unbearable. Is there any news about the election?

Butler – Not yet, Your Majesty. The final results are due at eight.

Princess – Fine... And Monsieur?

Butler – He hasn't returned to the palace, Your Majesty.

Princess – Very well... Let me know as soon as there's any news.

Butler – I won't fail to do so, Your Majesty.

The butler exits. She impatiently tosses the newspaper on the table and observes the chess game for a moment.

Princess – The game continues...

The leader of the opposition enters with a ceremonious air.

Leader – Good evening, Your Majesty.

Princess *(impatiently)* – Ah, at last! What's up?

He kisses her hand.

Leader *(keeping her in suspense)* – Well, Your Majesty?

Princess – Don't keep me waiting any longer... What are the election results?

Leader *(with a somber look)* – The counting isn't quite finished yet, but... *(With a wide smile)* I've been elected with a large majority!

She rises from her throne and kisses him.

Princess – Congratulations! It's wonderful! For us... For the country... We must celebrate this!

She grabs the bell, but he stops her.

Leader – Wait... I've always dreamed of doing this... Can I?

Princess – Go ahead. You'll see, it's a bit like a magic lamp. A genie appears, and you can ask for whatever you want. But be careful, it's highly addictive. Once you've started, you can't stop.

The leader takes the bell and rings it. The butler arrives.

Butler – Your Majesty rang...

Princess – Bring us some champagne, please. We're going to toast to our victory!

Butler – Right away, Your Majesty.

Princess – So, my friend? You must be happy too, aren't you? This victory is first and foremost the people's, so it's yours too!

Butler – Of course, Your Majesty. Congratulations, sir.

Leader – Thank you, my good man.

The butler exits.

Leader – Maybe we should have asked him to toast with us...

Princess – Oh yes, that's true, I didn't think of that...

Leader – Well, then again... it might make him uncomfortable.

Princess – Yes, probably...

Leader – Well... In the end, it's still the people's victory...

Princess – Of course... *(Smiling somewhat embarrassed)* So, I'm going to have to appoint you Prime Minister.

He kisses her.

Leader – But you will remain my queen, for life.

Princess – I can't imagine spending my life cutting ribbons and smiling for photographers. Perhaps we ought to think about abolishing the monarchy one day.

Leader – Well, why rush into it? The people seem to have developed a taste for royalty. And they eagerly await our wedding.

Princess – You're right. Offices and factories have reopened, but all the theatres remain closed. A royal wedding will provide some distraction. And what about the epidemic?

Leader – Our doctors have finally managed to contain it. But they still haven't found a remedy for those mild yet inconvenient intestinal issues...

Princess – Our borders are closed due to fear of contagion. No tourists are coming to our country for vacations, and none of our citizens can go on holiday abroad either.

Leader – Why travel halfway around the world to get an upset stomach when you can get one without ever leaving home?

Princess – Let's hope your government soon finds a way to restore normal traffic, both across our borders and through our intestines.

Leader – Since you brought up the topic of the new government's composition... what about the minister and the general?

Princess – My father demanded their heads, but I commuted their sentence to banishment... They are prohibited from staying in the capital. So they're starting a tour of the provinces.

Leader – A tour?

Princess – Apparently they've set up a travelling theatre company.

Leader – That will give them some fresh air. Besides, the theatre in our country was starting to feel a bit stale, wasn't it?

Princess – Speaking of things that smell, we might need to freshen up a bit around here too.

Leader – Oh, really?

Princess – It smells like shit, doesn't it?

Leader – I don't know... Actually, I haven't been able to smell anything lately.

Princess – Another side effect: they've lost not only their sense of judgement, but their sense of smell. They can't even smell the mess they're in.

Leader – It's almost a miracle... It will make governing them even easier.

Princess – And what about our strategic stockpile of toilet paper?

Leader – The army requisitioned newspaper to use as toilet paper. Farewell to bad news! You won't be reading the press anytime soon.

Princess – Isn't that a bit dangerous for freedom of expression and democracy?

Leader – No newspapers, no unpleasant comments about the government's actions... The grace period will be extended.

Princess – Yes... But it's the first step toward a new dictatorship... Be careful, my father too, in the beginning, had some ideals...

Leader – All of this is temporary, my dear, but... it's obvious that there will be a before and an after. And in the world after, we won't be living exactly as we did before...

Princess – When you say "we," you mean the people, I suppose, because for us... everything will go as before, won't it?

Leader – Of course...

The Queen Mother enters.

Queen – My dear, are you forgetting that we're going to London to choose your wedding dress? The private jet is waiting.

Princess – Of course, Mother, I'm ready.

Leader – Shall I come with you?

Queen – Well, my dear, you know that the groom shouldn't see the dress before the ceremony!

Leader – In that case, I'll leave you... We'll toast with champagne later. Have a good day, ladies. See you tonight, darling...

He kisses her and exits.

Queen – He's truly charming... And to think, at first, your father took him for a dreadful leftist...

The mother and daughter also prepare to leave.

Princess – Speaking of my father, how is he doing?

Queen – My goodness... I fear he's not completely out of the woods yet...

Princess – And where is he then?

Queen – Like all the citizens of this kingdom, my dear... On his throne!

They exit. The chambermaid enters and starts tidying up the throne room. The butler enters with a tray, carrying a bottle of champagne and two flutes. Seeing that everyone else has left, he offers a flute to the chambermaid.

Butler – Madam is served!

Chambermaid – Thank you, my friend. So, are we making peace too?

They toast.

Butler – To the return of democracy in our beloved country!

Chambermaid – Let's just say to the return of elections, at least.

Butler – You're right, it's not always exactly the same thing.

Chambermaid – Elections are to democracy what a honeymoon is to a marriage of convenience... A week given away in a tropical palace, for a life in debt in a suburban flat.

They pour themselves more and drink.

Butler – If only we could go to the theatre! Can you imagine? They've shut them all...

Chambermaid – Well, we were quite bored at the theatre anyway.

Butler – True. It had become nothing but a theatre of courtiers. No one will even notice its disappearance.

Chambermaid – There was a time when playwrights like Molière risked their lives with every new play. What do we risk on stage today?

Butler – Apart from catching diarrhoea?

Chambermaid – Those clowns are only afraid of losing their public funding and their privileges.

Butler – Sad but true. Closing this sort of theatre would almost be a public service.

Butler – When publicly funded theatres become family businesses passed down from parent to child, it's time to turn off the money.

Chambermaid – Abolish the subsidies!

Butler – And abolish the special benefits for performers!

Silence. Possible reactions from the audience.

Chambermaid – I hope there are no theatre managers or performers in the audience, or we'll be the next ones facing the guillotine...

Butler – I'd be surprised if there weren't. They're about the only people who still go to the theatre. More champagne?

Chambermaid – With pleasure.

They drink again. Silence. They slowly come back to reality.

Chambermaid – Meanwhile, we'll have to tidy all this up...

Butler – In government as on stage, elections may change the people in charge, but we remain their servants.

Chambermaid – Well... At least we get five minutes between one dictatorship and the next.

Butler – A quick game?

They sit on either side of the chessboard. She takes a pawn in each hand and offers him her closed fists.

Chambermaid – Come on! Pick a side!

Blackout.

The End

About the author

Born in 1955 in Auvers-sur-Oise (France), Jean-Pierre Martinez first took to the stage as a drummer in several rock bands before becoming a semiologist in advertising. He then worked as a television screenwriter before returning to the stage as a playwright. He has written around a hundred scripts for television and 123 plays, some of which have become classics (*Friday the 13th, Strip Poker*). His plays have been performed in more than 100 countries and translated into around 50 languages.

Amateur and professional theatre groups looking for plays to perform can download Jean-Pierre Martinez's plays for free from his websites :

https://jeanpierremartinez.net/

https://comediatheque.net/

However, performance rights, which constitute fair compensation for the author's work, are a legal obligation. Whether you are an amateur or a professional, you must request authorization to perform the play and pay the corresponding royalties for the production.

Jean-Pierre Martinez is represented by the Society of Dramatic Authors and Composers (SACD).

To get in touch with Jean-Pierre Martinez and request authorization to perform one of his works, please use the contact form on his websites.

Jean-Pierre Martinez recently returned to music, writing original songs inspired by his poems and plays.

With **Jean-Pierre Martinez Music**, he extends that creative universe through original songs: short stories in musical form, humorous or melancholy, in which each song sometimes becomes a miniature theatrical scene.

https://jeanpierremartinezmusic.com/

Other plays by the same author translated in English:

Monologues

Happy Dogs
Like a fish in the air
Short Stories

Comedies for 2

A Thwarted Vocation
EuroStar
Heads and Tails
Him and Her
Is there a pilot in the audience?
Last chance encounter
New Year's Eve at the Morgue
Not even dead
Pentimento
Preliminaries
Running on empty
Russian Roulette at the Kremlin
The Costa Mucho Castaways
The Dressing Gown
The Joker
The Rope
The Window across the courtyard

Comedies for 3

A brief moment of eternity
A simple business dinner
An innocent little murder
Cards on the Table
Cheaters
Crash Zone
Fragile, Handle with care
Friday the 13th
Horizons
Ménage à trois
One small step for a woman, one giant leap backward for Mankind
The Ways of Chance

Comedies for 4

A Cuckoo's nest
A hell of a night
A Skeleton in the Closet
Back to stage
Bed and Breakfast
Casket for two
Crisis and Punishment
Déjà vu
Family Portrait
Family Tree
Four stars
Friday the 13th
Gay friendly
Hangover
Happy Hour
How to get rid of your best friends
Is there a critic in the audience?
Is there an author in the audience?
Just a moment before the end of the world
Lovestruck at Swindlemore Hall
One marriage out of two
Perfect In-laws
Quarantine
Requiem for a Stradivarius
Strip Poker
Surviving Mankind
The Deal
The Fishbowl
The Perfect Son-in-Law
The Pyramids
The Smell of Money
The Tourists
The Worst Best Man Ever

Comedies for 5 to 6

All's well that starts badly
Christmas Eve at the Police Station
Crisis and Punishment
Critical but Stable
Dead End Boulevard
In lieu of flowers...
King of Fools
The Castaways of New Year's Eve
The President's Draw
The Rebels
Traffic Jam on Graveyard Lane

Comedies for 7 or more

At the bar counter
Backstage Comedy
Blue Flamingos
Check to the Kings
Christmas Eve at the Police Station
False exit
In flagrante delirium
Just like a Christmas movie
Miracle at Saint Mary Juana Abbey
Music does not always soothe ...
Neighbours' Day
Nicotine
Of Vegetables and Books
Offside
Open Hearts
Reality Show
Save our Savings
Special Dedication
Stories and Prehistories
Such a lovely village
The House of Our Dreams
The Jackpot
The Performance is not cancelled
The Most Beautiful Village in France
The Worst Village in England
Welcome aboard!
White Coats, Dark Humour

Collection of sketches

Apocalypse
Backstage Bits
Blackouts
Don't panic!
Dramedies
Enough is Enough
Ethan and Eve
Every Colour under the Sun
For real and for fun
Funny Stories
Him and Her
Killer Sketches
Lockdown Shorts
Lost time Chronicles
Memoirs of a Suitcase
No Sense Off Limits
Now and then
Of Animals and Men
Open Hearts
Open Letters
Park Bench Shorts
Sidewalk Chronicles
Stage Briefs
Stories to die for

All of Jean-Pierre Martinez's plays can be downloaded

free of charge from his websites:

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https://comediatheque.net/

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