

Chapter 3:

FOR SUCH A TIME AS THIS

Esther 4:4–17

*I went down to the nut orchard,
to look at the blossoms of the valley,
to see whether the vines had budded,
whether the pomegranates were in bloom.
Before I was aware, my fancy set me
in a chariot beside my prince.¹*

The song ran through Hathach's head as she trailed her fingers in the water of the pool. The queen often sang the song as they prepared her for a night in the king's quarters, and Hathach had memorized most of it. She especially liked the descriptions of the lovers. *How graceful are your feet in sandals, O queenly maiden! Your rounded thighs are like jewels, the work of a master hand.*² The work of a eunuch's hand, more like it. She lifted her own hand and watched as the drops of water ran off her fingers. Years of rubbing oils into the shoulders of the queen had given her delicate skin, if nothing else. She put the hand to her face and smelled the scent of the oils. The scent of womanhood.

Whenever Hathach had some time for herself, she would come here to the innermost courtyard of the women's palace. To be among the blooming trees and songbirds. To drape herself under the canopy and trail her fingers in the water of the pool. Sometimes she would embroider. Sometimes paint. But always she imagined she was waiting for a lover who would carry her away in a chariot to a place where she could be queen and be waited on by eunuchs and

¹ Song 6:11–12 NRSV.

² Song 7:1 NRSV.

maids. In that far off place, there would be no one to look at her and wonder about her large hands or her broad shoulders. She would be a queen, chosen for her stunning beauty and quick wit. And she and her king would travel together in his chariot wherever they wished.

This garden in the women's palace was the closest she came to going outdoors anymore. She'd grown tired of the sideways glances of the adults and blatant stares of the children in the market. So, she simply stayed in. She was the queen's favorite attendant, which meant she could order the others to do the errands that required crossing the threshold. She fulfilled the more personal functions and let them do the running. That had worked for several years, and she was happy with her life — especially on those afternoons when the queen was napping and she could come here to the garden and daydream.

*I am a rose of Sharon,
a lily of the valleys.
As a lily among brambles,
so is my love among men.³*

Hathach smiled and lay back on her pillow. She closed her eyes and thought about taking a nap of her own. She heard footsteps, and turning saw one of the queen's maids.

“My lord,” the maid said, “the queen needs you.”

The fantasy was ended, then. Time to return to duty. As Hathach spoke, his own voice destroyed what was left of the daydream, “Tell her I'll be right there.”

“Yes, my lord.” The maid rotated to leave, and Hathach reached for the embroidery he had brought with him. He hadn't even touched it. There hadn't been time.

³ Song 2:1–2 NRSV. The biblical text reads, “so is my love among women.”

As he rose, he grunted softly with the effort. What could the queen want so soon after lying down? He couldn't imagine.

As he entered the queen's chamber, she reached her hands out to him. They were shaking. "Hathach, dear, I need you to find out why Cousin Mordecai is mourning."

Hathach took her hands. "Mourning?"

A maid spoke up, "He's at the entrance of the king's gate, wearing sackcloth and ashes."

"We saw him on our way back from the market," added a eunuch.

"The last time Mordecai wore sackcloth was when my Papa . . ." Esther released Hathach's hands and drew her arms around herself. "It means . . . someone's died."⁴ She began to cry, and two of the maids guided her toward a cushioned bench. She sat down and looked up at Hathach. "Someone's died. Someone close to me has *died*." And she began to weep more loudly.

Hathach looked at the eunuch who'd seen Mordecai. "Who's died?"

"We don't know. He won't talk — just wails and moans. He's making quite a scene. We took him fresh clothes, but he pushed us away and fell down on the ground. He just kept saying, 'All dead. All dead.'"

"Oh!" Esther looked up. "You're sure he said, 'all?'" She put her hand to her mouth, and whispered, "Like Abba and Imma." She closed her eyes and breathed, "It must have been fever,

⁴ Wearing sackcloth was a sign of mourning. Gerald F. Hawthorne, "Mourning," *OCB*, 531 (cf. 2 Sam 3:31; Job 42:6; Dan 9:3; Jonah 3:6).

or maybe . . .” She opened her eyes, but stared at the floor not finishing the sentence. Then she looked up at Hathach. “You have to talk to him.”

Hathach’s belly tightened. The entrance to the king’s palace opened onto the market, and was always bustling with people.⁵ “Me?” he stammered. “Perhaps we should send one of the others. I’m sure Zethar would be happy to . . .”

She interrupted him, “I’ve already sent them. He won’t talk to them.” The queen’s mouth was tight and her eyes stared at him as she spoke. Then she softened, “Hathach, it has to be you. Darling, don’t you see? I can’t go to him myself, or I would.”

“But you could write a letter, and we could have . . .”

“No.” Her eyes narrowed. “I sent a note with the clothes. He wouldn’t read it.” She stood and reached out to touch him on the forearm. “Hathach, he needs *me*. But I’m not permitted to go to him.” Her grip tightened. “You are my closest friend — the only one who can do this. You must go. Be Hadassah to him.”⁶ He looked into her face, red from crying. She had never called him “friend” before and he wanted to help her, but his fear held him tight. His eyes flicked back and forth, looking at one of her pupils and then the other. How should he respond? What could he say? Slowly her face hardened. She could see the hesitancy in him. Then she spoke, “Hathach, you *will* go to him. I’ll command you if necessary.”

⁵ The Masoretic Text says Mordacai was at “the gate of the king” (שַׁעַר הַמֶּלֶךְ /*ša’ar hammelek*) and in “the broad open place of the city” (רֶחֶב הָעִיר /*rēḥōb hā’ir*). This description indicates he would have been in a place where legal business was done (i.e., the gate, cf. Ruth 4:1–12) and where people gathered (i.e., the broad open place, cf. Zech 8:4–5). There is more discussion on this topic in the analysis following this narrative retelling.

⁶ Hadassah is Esther’s Hebrew name. The Persian name Esther was probably assigned to her when she entered the king’s harem. (Esth 2:7).

“Yes, my queen,” he whispered. She could call him friend, but she still had the power to command.

She sighed and her shoulders relaxed. “Thank you,” she whispered. “Thank you, Hathach. Tell him his Hadassah hasn’t forgotten him. Tell him she still sings the songs he taught her.” She sat back down on the bench. “Go. Hurry.”

“Yes, my queen.” And he turned to leave.

In the hallway, Hathach drew in a deep breath and looked toward the far door that led to the outer courtyard. He tried to remember Esther’s red eyes and imagine he was doing this for his friend. But, all he could think of was the voice of the queen saying, “I’ll command you if necessary.”

Later, Hathach took another deep breath and remembered Esther’s voice as he passed through the king’s gate, and into the outside world. Once out of the gate, he immediately saw Mordecai, sitting in the dust, arms hugging his body, rocking back and forth. There was a space around him of a few cubits,⁷ as people walked out of their way to avoid the spectacle. Most of the adults averted their eyes. Some of the children stared. No one stopped.

He must go to him. It was time.

Hathach’s stomach tightened as he stepped from the shadow of the gate into the wide open market. He held his hand against his belly, took a deep breath, and gathered himself to step

⁷ The cubit, Hebrew אַמָּה (*ammāh*), was a unit of measurement equaling roughly 17.5 inches (*OCB*, 796).

toward Esther's cousin. But, just then he felt a jolt, as someone bumped into him. "Watch where you're going, eunuch," a man barked.

"Forgive me." With the words, Hathach instinctively averted his eyes and lowered his head in deference. But the man had already passed. Then Hathach thought to turn and go back to the women's quarters, but his feet wouldn't move. They seemed to have taken root. He stood and watched Mordecai as the people moved past. Like a river flowing around a tree, they gurgled and bounced around him.

Hathach stood and watched the mourning man, who stared out into the marketplace seeing only his own visions. Finally, Hathach felt his feet step forward and he spoke, "Cousin! Cousin Mordecai. I come from Hadassah."

Mordecai looked up at him, squinting. "Who calls me cousin?"

"I'm Hathach, personal servant of your cousin Hadassah."

"Hadassah." Mordecai's eyes closed, "Queen Esther. Queen Esther. She will die too. The queen's crown will not save her." Then he began rocking again. "Dead. Dead. Dead. All dead. All dead."

Hathach gathered his hem in his hand and squatted next to the man. He could smell the ash, and the unwashed stench of him. "Who's dead, cousin? Please tell me who's died. I haven't heard any reports, and Hadassah's worried. For Hadassah's sake, stop chanting long enough to tell me who you're mourning for."

"All of us!" The man stopped suddenly. "Everyone. Everyone! Hadassah included. We're all dead . . . because of Haman."

Hathach knew of Haman from the eunuchs who attended the king — a social-climbing Agagite with a foul temper, much-feared by the servants of the palace.⁸ Surely he would have heard rumors if Haman had plans to kill the queen and her family. But, he'd heard nothing. "Haman wishes to kill Queen Esther, and he thinks he can destroy her family as well? Are you sure of this?"

"Not *Hadassah's* family." Mordecai took on the tone one would use with a stupid child. "All of us! Every one of the Jews." He handed Hathach an edict, marked with the royal seal.

Hathach scanned the opening paragraphs of the document — the usual niceties about the glory of the king and the wealth of the empire, then a reference to Haman "who excels among us in sound judgment."⁹ Haman must have written this, Hathach thought. Finally, the heart of the letter. It called for the destruction of a certain group of people in the month of Adar — wives and children included. It said the people would be indicated in letters written by Haman. Did that Agagite really mean to kill all the Jews? Didn't he know the queen herself was a Jew? Perhaps not. She certainly didn't sing her Jewish wedding songs for him. She saved those for her girlfriends in the women's quarters.

Hathach took Mordecai's hand. "Take heart, Cousin Mordecai. Hadassah won't let this happen to you and your family. We'll hide you away somewhere. We'll pay someone to take you by night to . . ."

⁸ Haman, the antagonist in the book of Esther, is "the son of Hammedatha the Agagite" (3:1 NRSV)..

⁹ Esther (Grk) 13:3 NRSV.

“No.” Mordecai grabbed him, suddenly strong and coherent. “This is not about me or my family. You must tell the queen to go before the king on behalf of her people.” He grabbed the edict, which Hathach had laid on the ground, and pressed it into Hathach’s hand. “Take this. Read it to her. Tell her Cousin Mordecai begs her to stop this. Go. Now. I wait for news of our deliverance.” With that, Mordecai closed his eyes and began rocking again, moaning and chanting in his language.

Hathach took the edict and put it in his tunic-front. He rose and looked around. A young girl was staring at him from across the market. When he saw her, she turned away and grabbed her mother’s hand. Leaning in, the mother listened to something the girl was saying and then looked in Hathach’s direction. She shook her head and pulled the child close as they passed into the market crowd. Hathach turned to face the threshold of the king’s palace. He would soon be in the safety of the women’s quarters.

Shortly before sunset, later that day, Hathach found himself again in the market. The vendors were gathering their wares as he walked through the outer door of the king’s gate. As nightfall moved in and the people crept home, the open square would grow unsafe. Hathach was glad he’d brought two of the younger eunuchs with him.¹⁰ Motioning to them to follow, he walked quickly to the mourning relative of the queen, hoping to finish before the sunlight left. As he approached

¹⁰ In the second encounter with Mordecai, the text says, “When they told [וַיִּגִּדּוּ/wayyaggidû] Mordecai . . .” (4:12 NRSV)

he spoke softly, “Cousin Mordecai, I’ve returned from Hadassah. She wants me to arrange for your transport to a safer . . .”

Mordecai looked at him, wide-eyed, “Has she spoken with the king already?”

“No. She can’t go to the king, because he hasn’t called her in thirty days, and as everyone knows she risks her life if she goes to him without being called.”

“She risks her life if she does not go!” Mordecai turned and looked Hathach in the face. “She *must* go.”

“She can’t, cousin. It’s just not possible. Perhaps if she were still in his favor, or if we didn’t have the memory of the first queen to contend with, or maybe if . . .”

“You call me cousin.” Mordecai’s brow furrowed, “Yet you understand nothing. Our people are in grave danger. Haman has . . .”

“I know about Haman’s decree, you showed it to me this morning.” Hathach gathered up his hem and squatted next to the old man for the second time that day. “I know about your people and the danger they’re in. I’ve read the decree several times, and could probably even quote it to you. I’m not your relative, but I am the messenger of the queen’s love. She sent me on her behalf. She can’t go to the king, but there are things we can do to make sure your family’s safe. I’ve brought these men to arrange for your family’s safe passage to . . .”

“How will you arrange for my safety? There are no safe passages. There is nowhere from India to Ethiopia for a Jew to hide.”¹¹

¹¹ King Ahasuerus is said to have “ruled over one hundred twenty-seven provinces from India to Ethiopia” (Esth 1:1 NRSV).

Hathach touched him gently on the arm. “We’ll find a place. Hadassah’s now Queen Esther, and she has resources that you don’t know about.”

Mordecai pulled his arm away. “The queen’s resources,” he spat. “Does she think the queen is safe from Haman’s trickery? Does she think people haven’t seen her servants bringing me clothes? She’s not safe — not even in the women’s quarters. Anyone can kill a Jew on the 13th day of Adar. Anyone can kill us, without punishment. Does she have rivals in the palace? Do you think you can keep them from her? They’ll kill you, too.” Mordecai put his hand out and raised himself, so as to look Hathach directly in the face. “Do you love her?”

“I’m committed to her.”

“You called me cousin. Are you committed to our family, as well?”

“You’re the queen’s highest priority, and I’m the queen’s personal attendant. Whatever her priorities are, those are my priorities too.”

“Then go to her. Be Mordecai to her. Take her the message I cannot take myself. Tell her if she does not go before the king, we all die. She will not escape, either. Wherever she hides us, we will be found.” He stopped to scratch his shoulder through the sackcloth. Then he looked directly into Hathach’s eyes. “And tell her this — if she remains silent, then help will come from another quarter. But she and her family will perish. We will all be destroyed. You must convince her.” He took Hathach’s hands in his. “Who knows, perhaps she came to royal dignity for just such a time as this.”

Mordecai’s resolve was contagious. “I’ll take your message to her, and I promise I won’t fail you this time.”

“Be my voice to her.”

“I’ll do everything I can.” Hathach reached for the hand of the young eunuch standing next to him and pulled himself up. “Good night cousin. Would you like me to leave these eunuchs with you as guards for the night?”

“No,” Mordecai winked. “No one bothers a crazy old man.”

Hathach turned and saw that the East wall was shining pink from the reflection of the sun. Best return to the queen.

Esther was in the inner courtyard, when Hathach came to her with Mordecai’s words. She liked to walk in the garden at night, when she didn’t have to worry about the sun and what it would do to her well-kept skin. In the moonlight, there was no need for canopies and draperies to stand guard over her. Esther was standing by the daydreaming pool as Hathach crossed the threshold to the garden. She turned and smiled. “Did you take care of him?” But her smile darkened as Hathach’s face came into focus.

“Queen, your cousin’s a wise man, and . . .”

She crossed her arms. “I know he’s wise. What did he tell you this time?”

“He gave me a message that I believe you’ll want to consider. He doesn’t think we can keep him safe, and he’s probably right.” Hathach took her hand and led her to the edge of the pool.

Later, as they talked together about what her cousin had said and what she should do, Hathach trailed his hands in the water. Here in the moonlight, in the inner garden, he sometimes

imagined they were girlfriends or sisters, planning to capture a king's heart. Tonight, they leaned in close to whisper, and he didn't have to imagine they were friends. Tonight they were truly confidants, planning a daring rescue. They decided she couldn't simply show up in the throne room and ask for a favor, so she would ask the king to a banquet — perhaps two.

*Come with me my husband . . .
from the den of lions,
from the mountain of leopards.*¹²

They would call him away from the vipers who surrounded him in the throne room. They would invite Haman — have Haman present when she asked the king for her people's lives — that would unbalance the conniving Agagite, keep him from making a counter-attack. Still there was the matter of going to the king to request the banquet. What if the King Ahasuerus had Esther's head? He hadn't called her in over a month, after all.

"You must go to Mordecai one more time." Esther touched Hathach's hand and he could feel her's shaking. "I need the Jews to fast on my behalf. They should fast for three days — neither eat nor drink. And, we'll do the same here in the palace. After that, I'll go to the king. And if I perish, I perish."

Hathach looked at her, and then looked around at the garden. The moon had moved behind a cloud, and he could barely make out the shapes of the trees. The market would be completely deserted by now, except for the vagrants digging through the trash heaps, and Cousin Mordecai lying in the ashes. It would be foolhardy to go to him before morning. But Mordecai must be told tonight, if the preparations were to be made.

¹² Song 4:8 NRSV, substituting "husband" for "bride."

Just then Hathach remembered part of the message, which he'd forgotten to say to the queen. "Hadassah, Cousin Mordecai said something else I almost forgot. He said, 'Who knows, perhaps you were brought to the palace for just such a time as this.'"

Esther looked across the water. "Perhaps I was," she whispered. "Perhaps I was." She looked at Hathach and smiled. "Thank Adonai for you, my dear." She raised his hand and kissed it.

And for a moment Hathach had no need for daydreams, no desire to be anyone but who he was.

ANALYSIS

The story of Hathach occurs at the turning point of the book of Esther — almost exactly at the halfway mark. As the story has unfolded, Queen Vashti has made the Persian king angry and been banished in Chapter 1. In the pages that follow, the king decides to have a contest to choose a new queen, and a young Jewish girl named Esther is chosen to enter the harem as part of that contest. Keeping her Jewish identity a secret, Esther wins the favor of Hegai, the eunuch in charge of the maids, and with his help wins the king's favor and the queenship. Meanwhile Esther's Cousin Mordecai, who raised Esther since she was orphaned, has made the vice-regent, Haman, angry by refusing to bow to him when he passes by the king's gate each morning and evening. Haman is sufficiently angry to destroy Mordecai, but decides it is not enough to kill just Mordecai — he must destroy the entire Jewish people. Unaware Queen Esther is a Jew, Haman convinces the king to make a decree that on the 13th day of Adar people everywhere in the empire should rise up “to destroy, to kill, and to annihilate all Jews, young and old, women and children.” (3:13 NRSV) This is where Chapter 4 begins. The narrator tells us, “When Mordecai learned all that had been done, Mordecai tore his clothes and put on sackcloth and ashes, and went through the city, wailing with a loud and bitter cry” (4:1 NRSV).

The verses containing the story of Hathach the eunuch (4:4–17) begin at this point with the unusual use of a feminine plural verb to refer to a group of mixed company. After going through the city, Mordecai has stopped at the king's gate where he now sits in sackcloth and ashes, wailing loudly and making quite a commotion. The narrator then says, “And Esther's maids and

eunuchs came to her [feminine plural¹³] and they told [masculine plural¹⁴] her” (4:4 au. trans.).

The use of both the feminine and the masculine plurals to refer to the same group draws attention to their gender.

As in most gendered languages, the default in Hebrew is masculine. So, if a group of people contains even one male the masculine plural form of the verb should be used. But the narrator seems confused. In one instance the group is referred to as female and in the other as male. The reader is left to wonder, do the eunuchs in this group count as men or not? This is the question that will drive Hathach’s story. For it is Hathach’s ambiguous gender that gives him access to both Esther and Mordecai — his dual citizenship in the worlds of men and women makes it possible for Hathach to carry the message of Haman’s plot across the border separating Mordecai and Esther.

In the scene immediately preceding, when Mordecai first arrives at the palace, the narrator tells us that Mordecai stands outside the king’s gate, because “no one might enter the king’s gate clothed with sackcloth” (4:2b NRSV). However, even if he were dressed in his finest robes he would likely not be allowed in to see the queen. As already mentioned, Esther has not revealed her people to the king — she does not publicly reveal her relationship to Mordecai until 8:1.¹⁵ So, although male relatives would generally be allowed in the women’s quarters of most houses, even in the strictest societies, Mordecai at this point in the story is not officially a male relative

¹³ וַתָּבֹאוּ אֵינָהּ (*wattēbô`ênāh*).

¹⁴ וַיִּגִּידוּ (*wayyaḡḡîdû*).

¹⁵ “And Moredecai came before the king, for Esther had told what he was to her.” (8:1b NRSV)

and can therefore not enter. However, even if he were accepted as a relative, he might not be allowed in the *royal* harem. Although the laws for King Ahasuerus's house are not delineated, we know that in the Assyrian empire of the 9th century B.C.E., even male relatives were not allowed in the royal harem. "The only males permitted to enter the royal harem were eunuchs, and the efficacy of their castration was periodically verified."¹⁶ Mordecai's exclusion from the harem is also implied in 2:11, "Every day Mordecai would walk around in front of the court of the harem to learn how Esther was and how she fared" (NRSV).

Beyond this, the narrator indicates that Esther is sequestered and may not go to Mordecai to speak with him. In 4:4, though Esther is "deeply distressed" (NRSV), she does not go to Mordecai herself. Instead, she sends servants to him with garments. We have no indication that this sort of sequestering of the royal women was actually practiced in Persia; however, the separation of men from the royal women is clearly a part of the world of this story. In the first chapter of Esther, Queen Vashti gives a women's banquet inside the palace, while King Ahasuerus has his banquet for the men "in the court of the garden" (1:5). In this instance, we know from the writings of the historian Herodotus that wives and concubines would normally have sat next to the men at such Persian banquets.¹⁷ The narrator seems unaware or unconcerned with these historical facts — in this story the men and women of the palace are separated by an impassable barrier. And this is where the eunuch Hathach becomes a necessary messenger.

¹⁶ Hayim Tadmor, "Was the Biblical *sārîs* a Eunuch," in *Solving Riddles and Untying Knots: Biblical, Epigraphic, and Semitic Studies in Honor of Jonas C. Greenfield* (ed. Ziony Zevit, Seymour Gitin, and Michael Sokoloff; Winona Lake, Indiana: Eisenbrauns, 1995), 319.

¹⁷ Carol Meyers, "Women at Vashti's Banquet," *WIS*, 290.

As I indicated in Chapter 1, eunuchs served as boundary-keepers in ancient western Asia and were often thought of as neither men nor women. Hathach, introduced as one of the king's eunuchs assigned to Esther, guards the very boundary that separates Esther from Mordecai. As a harem eunuch, he is permitted to come and go from the women's quarters, moving freely between the outside world and that of the royal women. In the context of the story, where men and women of the palace are segregated, Hathach is treated as both or neither and is therefore exempt from the rules of segregation. Again, this precedent is established in the scene of the banquets at the beginning of the book. In that scene, the drunken king decides to show off his beautiful wife, and sends seven eunuchs to the women's banquet to fetch Queen Vashti. Now, it is the queen who needs a eunuch messenger. And Hathach is just the person for the task.

It is at this point in the plot that I take some liberties in my narrative retelling. In the tradition of the Rabbis, who often expanded the spaces between words so they could fill them with stories, I have Esther first ask, and then — only after Hathach hesitates in fear — command him to go. (In the biblical text she simply commands.) My intention is to emphasize that the world outside the harem was an uncomfortable place for a eunuch, particularly one who thrived in the women's world.

A twenty-first century reader, unfamiliar with the milieu of this text, may think of eunuchs as very much like other men — able to pass unnoticed in the marketplace. However, Charles Pellat says of eunuchs in later Islamic societies that they “did not mingle much with the general

population, especially as they were easily recognisable [sic].”¹⁸ As mentioned in Chapter 1, castrated men developed physical characteristics that distinguished them from other men. They had higher voices, were beardless, and tended toward obesity and gigantism. However, my experience with another class of sexual/gender minority (contemporary gay men) leads me to suspect that eunuchs probably had certain ways of dressing and carrying themselves that distinguished them to an even greater degree from other males. Much like the character Albert in the movie *The Birdcage* (a swishy gay man, and female impersonator, who only looks “more obvious” when he dresses in a tuxedo and tie), a eunuch who spent most of his time in the women’s quarters probably developed a manner of speaking and moving that would have been viewed by his contemporaries as characteristically feminine, no matter how he was dressed.

The point is further emphasized, because the narrator tells us that “Hathach went out to Mordecai in the open square of the city in front of the king’s gate” (4:6a NRSV). Previously, the narrator only says Mordecai went “up to the entrance of the king’s gate” (4:2a NRSV). The added phrase “the open square of the city” (רְחֹב הָעִיר/*rěḥôb hā’îr*) highlights the difference between Mordecai’s view of the world and Hathach’s.

The open square would have been a high traffic area where people congregated. The exact phrase *rěḥôb hā’îr*, translated “open square of the city” by the NRSV, occurs only six times in the Hebrew Bible.¹⁹ In Esther, it is found in a comic scene where Haman is forced to honor

¹⁸ Charles Pellat, “*Khāṣi*,” *Encyclopedia of Islam*, (ed. Charles Pellat, et al., 6 vols; Leiden: Brill, 1978), 4:1091.

¹⁹ Judg 19:15, 17; Zech 8:5, Esth 6:9, 11.

Mordecai by leading him through the open square of the city dressed in fine robes and riding the king's horse (6:9,11). In this scene the crowds of people implied by *rěḥôb hā'îr* intensify Haman's mortification. Zech 8:5 portrays the *rěḥôb* as a place where old men and women sit and young children laugh and play. The phrase also appears in Judg 19, where a stranger and his concubine are urged not to remain in the open square of the city. This story, which ends in the gang-rape and mutilation of the concubine, parallels the near-gang rape of angels by the men of Sodom in Gen 19. In that story, Lot finds the angels in the square (*rěḥôb* without the qualifier *hā'îr*) and also urges them not to stay there — apparently the *rěḥôb* could be a dangerous place for an outsider. The particular *rěḥôb* where Hathach is sent would be busier than most, because of its proximity to the king's gate. Gates were places of legal justice, where citizens came to settle legal disputes, and the king served as the supreme judge in such legal matters.²⁰ So, this particular gate, located just outside the palace in the winter capitol of the Persian empire, would have been a place where people came from all over the empire — “from India to Ethiopia” (1:1 NRSV) — to have their cases heard.

For Hathach, passing through the king's gate means entering a bustling marketplace, far from the confines of the harem where he has excelled — on the other side of the gate is a place where his status as a eunuch is a cause for denigration, not a sign of free passage. The exposed nature of the setting and the presence of crowds of people would likely be uncomfortable, if not dangerous, for him. Anyone who has crossed gender expectations understands the potential

²⁰ Deut 21:19; 22:15; Josh 20:4; Ruth 4:1-11; 2 Sam 15:2-3; 18:24; 1 Kgs 22:10; Prov 31:23; Isa 29:21; Jer 1:15-16; Amos 5:12, 15. See above, p 35.

dangers inherent in large crowds — one is never quite sure what to expect of strangers. As Quentin Crisp, a twentieth-century, self-professed “elderly foreigner of dubious gender” put it, “You never went past a group of people — you avoided them and went past another way.”²¹ And yet, Hathach goes because he is needed, and because the queen has commanded him.

Once Hathach arrives, Mordecai tells all. Before, he had simply refused the change of clothes. Now, he even mentions “the exact sum of money that Haman had promised to pay into the king’s treasuries” (4:7 NRSV). Mordecai recognizes in Hathach the intelligence and savvy to grasp the situation, and he acknowledges him as the representative of Esther. In my narrative, I have Esther say to Hathach when she sends him to Mordecai, “be Hadassah to him.” And later Mordecai says, “be Mordecai to her.” These phrases illustrate that Hathach has the unique ability to represent each of them to the other. In the open square of the city (primarily the world of men), Hathach is a citizen of the harem. But, within the walls of the women’s quarters, he is a reminder of the outside world. It is his ambiguous gender status as both/neither, and his position as a boundary-keeper that makes him so perfectly suited for the task of messenger in this story. He belongs to the only class of people who can represent *both* Mordecai and Esther.

And this brings us to the climax of the chapter. Hathach’s story occurs at the turning point in the plot of the book of Esther. From this point on, the tide turns against Haman in favor of the Jews. The climax of the chapter occurs when Mordecai says to Esther (by way of Hathach), “Who knows? Perhaps you have come to royal dignity for just such a time as this” (4:14 NRSV).

²¹ Leslie Feinberg, *Transgender Warriors* (Boston: Beacon, 1996), 133.

And Esther accepts his challenge saying (again through Hathach), “I will go to the king, though it is against the law; and if I perish, I perish” (4:16 NRSV). Though God is never mentioned by name, the reader is meant to think about the work God does behind the scenes — creating people and placing them in certain situations in order to bring about God’s purposes. Who knows but that Esther was made more desirable than all the other girls and brought to the position of queen for the express purpose of saving her people, the Jews. And, by the same reasoning, perhaps Hathach was made a eunuch and given the position of boundary-keeper in the queen’s quarters so he could carry the messages between Mordecai and Esther. According to Mordecai’s interpretation of events, Esther’s marriage to a foreign king and Hathach’s eunuchism are not abominations, mistakes, or even the unhappy work of malevolent forces, but a necessary part of God’s plan to save the Jews. This is the message of the story, and the reason I included the daydream at the beginning of my narrative.

I said in Chapter 1 that issues of gender identity must be addressed when discussing stories of eunuchs in the Hebrew Scriptures *whenever* the biblical text makes such discussions reasonable. The text of Esth 4:4–17 clearly makes such discussion reasonable. Although there is no direct evidence to suggest the character of Hathach should be read as a transsexual, it is a possibility given the historical setting. In my retelling, Hathach is a biological male who, if born in the twenty-first century, would probably have been diagnosed with gender identity disorder and been a candidate for sex reassignment surgery. However, in ancient Persia such surgery was not an option, so Hathach chose the only available path — life as a eunuch. Of course, this option does not completely realize Hathach’s innate desire to be female, any more than sex reassignment

surgery can fully satisfy a modern transsexual. So, the Hathach of my narrative dreams of a place and a time where “she” can be as she imagines herself — a “real” woman.

Living on the border between the genders is not easy. As Bo Headlam, a twentieth century transgender puts it, “It is often difficult for me to exist in this manner that is so natural for me.”²² The issue for the ambiguously gendered person is that society wants neat packages. “Male, ambiguous, female, male and female. Those are the categories available, but they are not adequate to describe who I am,” says Kris, a genetic female often referred to as “sir” in her southern U.S. town.²³

It would be easy for the reader to pity Hathach, and for Hathach to pity him/herself for having to live in the border-regions of society. Like M., a transgender boy whose story appeared in the *New York Times Magazine*, Hathach might be tempted to say, “Why did God make me like this? . . . Why couldn’t he have just made me one way, either guy or girl?”²⁴ But the narrator doesn’t allow that. “Who knows?” the narrator has Mordecai say, “perhaps you have come to this position for just such a time as this.” This phrase, placed at the turning point of the book, is a message not just to Esther but to Hathach, and indeed to all of us who read this tale. Though God is often unseen (as in the book of Esther), we are urged to consider the possibility that the way we were created and the paths we have taken are not by chance. And the doors to which we have

²² Feinberg, 148.

²³ *Ibid.*, 159.

²⁴ Benoit Denizet-Lewis, “About a Boy Who Isn’t,” *New York Times Magazine* 5.26.02 (May 26, 2002), 34.

access are for our using — be they the doors to the king's chamber, or the doors between the worlds of male and female.