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CHARACTER / ACT BREAKDOWN

The Merchant of Venice

KEY CHARACTERS:

Antonio...a merchant

Bassanio...our hero, suitor to Portia, friend of Antonio's

Shylock...a Jewish moneylender

Jessica...Shylock's daughter, the ingenue in love with Lorenzo

Lorenzo...a young man in love with Jessica

Portia...our heroine, a rich heiress, and in love with Bassanio

Nerissa...Portia's confidante

Launcelot...servant of Shylock

ACT I:

Bassanio has been living beyond his means...

However, his BFF Antonio (who is a very successful merchant) is willing to bail him out, or willing to help pay off his creditors.

Bassanio is in love with Portia, whose wealth matches her beauty...she is also VERY smart. For this reason, a lot of suitors (or men who would like to marry her) flock to her. Bassanio therefore needs a little extra cash so that he can woo her in a style suitable to her situation.

All of Antonio's cash is tied up in ongoing ventures, but his credit is good in Venice and he agrees to raise the \$ which Bassanio needs.

However, even if Portia returns his love, she is not free to choose her husband...her father (when he died) gave her an unusual inheritance: he left three caskets (or boxes) one of gold, one of silver and one of lead. Each suitor would be required to choose one of the three. The first one to choose correctly (the casket containing her picture) would win Portia's hand in marriage.

Bassanio will borrow 3000 ducats for three months from Shylock. Antonio will sign his name to the deal. Shylock & Antonio have known each other for a long, long time...Antonio has been cruel to Shylock out of prejudice; Antonio is a Christian and Shylock is a Jew. Even now, when Antonio asks him for \$, he doesn't apologize for his vicious behavior but in fact promises to do it again! No wonder Shylock hates Antonio, but his hatred clouds his judgment.

Shylock agrees to lend Bassanio the full 3000 ducats BUT, if the full amount is not repaid in three months' time, Antonio will surrender a pound of his own flesh as payment. Bassanio is horrified by this deal...so bizarre and frightening! But, Antonio has a lot of pride and accepts the deal...he expects to be paid himself from one of his ventures a month ahead of the due date for Shylock, so he's not worried.

ACT II

Portia's suitors line up, and they just keep coming...but none of them choose the correct casket.

Bassanio is ready to go to Belmont, where Portia lives. But first he decides to throw a party. His friend Lorenzo is bringing his new girlfriend Jessica and the pair is planning to elope that night. Jessica has stolen jewels and cash from her father Shylock to help them on their journey to secretly wed.

Shylock finds out that Jessica eloped with a Christian and robbed him. He is furious...it is however unclear if he's angrier about his daughter marrying a Christian or the fact that she took valuable jewels and \$.

Bad things come for Antonio too...one of his ventures failed (a shipwreck). He has more ventures out there, being too wise to put all of his money on one single mercantile venture.

Portia continues to deal with all of these suitors...she's getting exasperated. Finally Bassanio arrives and she is filled with hope and excitement that this may, indeed be her guy!

ACT III

Bad news continues for Antonio...another of his ships wrecked, and his creditors are demanding payment. Shylock is certain that Antonio will not be able to repay the loan. Shylock loves \$ so much; why would he rather have Antonio's pound of flesh? Revenge. Antonio has disgraced Shylock repeatedly, interfering in his business, mocking his religion, insulting him, turning others against him – not for anything Shylock has done, but because he is a Jew.

Portia wants Bassanio to wait before choosing a casket, if he chooses incorrectly he must leave immediately and she wants to spend time with him...however, he jumps to choose and of course picks the correct casket. The one made of lead and least obvious. They are both thrilled and plan to marry that night. Also, Portia offers to repay Bassanio's loan, many times over if necessary, to prevent Shylock from taking his pound of flesh.

Jessica and Lorenzo have made their way to Belmont (invited by Bassanio). Portia offers to let them stay there while Bassanio returns to Venice to pay his debt.

After he leaves, Portia discusses the whole situation with her BFF Nerissa and decides she should probably follow along...and there's a twist!

ACT IV

The loan papers are in order...Antonio has no way out of his predicament. The loan is forfeit, and Antonio must pay with a pound of flesh. Bassanio offers to pay three times the amount, but Shylock out of hatred and revenge, insists on the original terms – a pound of flesh.

The duke has called for a wise doctor of the law (today it would be an attorney) to make the final judgment. That doctor (who is an old friend of Portia's dad) says that he's ill, but will send someone in his place...you guessed it, Portia, dressed as a man (since women didn't practice law at that time.)

Portia asks for mercy, not justice. Shylock refuses. Bassanio again offers to treble his payment. Shylock refuses. Portia pronounces her judgment: the loan is sound and Shylock is entitled to a pound of flesh to be cut nearest to Antonio's heart.

HOWEVER! Just as Shylock is about to carve into Antonio's chest, Portia catches a detail...the document doesn't mention any blood, only flesh. Should he also draw any blood, his life would be forfeit and all his goods taken away. According to the law.

The tables have turned and Shylock is now willing to accept any payment...but Portia will not let him. He demanded justice, and justice he will have. Shylock forgives the loan entirely and drops his suit against Antonio. But Portia is determined that justice be fully served...for plotting the death of Antonio, his goods and wealth are forfeit, half to the duke and half to Antonio.

Antonio will forgive his half of the fine, provided that Shylock gives the half to Jessica and Lorenzo. He also demands that Shylock must convert to Christianity...Shylock has no choice but to accept the terms.

ACT V

Bassanio and Antonio arrive in Belmont and deliver their happy news. Portia reveals that she was indeed the lawyer who saved Antonio, and she delivers a letter to Antonio, which states that some of his mercantile ventures actually paid out after all, that some of the ships returned to harbor in tact. Jessica is strangely saddened by the results of her behavior toward her father.

Portia and Bassanio will most likely live happily ever after.

Most likely...if no one makes bad investments and harbors hatred or is prejudiced.