

## Characters

The Chancellor (M)	-	King Jasper's right-hand man
King Jasper (M)	-	A fairytale monarch with a twelve-daughter problem
Diamond (F)	-	Eldest princess; the ringleader
Garnet (F)	-	2 <sup>nd</sup> eldest princess
Sapphire (F)	-	Next eldest princess
Topaz (F)	-	Next eldest princess
Opal (F)	-	Next eldest princess
Ruby (F)	-	Next eldest princess
Emerald (F)	-	Next eldest princess
Amethyst (F)	-	Next eldest princess
Citrine (F)	-	Next eldest princess
Jade (F)	-	Next eldest princess
Peridot (F)	-	Next eldest princess
Pearl (F)	-	The youngest princess; the conflicted one
Gendrick (M)	-	A middle-aged, discharged soldier
Laundress (F)	-	An old palace servant

## Scene 1 - Prelude

**(Lights up downstage. The stage is bare, except for single throne stage left, still shrouded in darkness. A trumpet blast announces the entry of the court Chancellor from stage left. With a scroll in hand, he crosses to centre stage and faces the audience with great importance.)**

**Chancellor:**

Hear ye, all ye people: the proclamation of the great King Jasper! **(Reads scroll)** 'Be it known that *any* man in this kingdom who can unravel the mystery of the princesses' dancing shoes shall choose a wife from among the king's twelve daughters and be made his heir. For although the twelve princesses sleep together in one room behind locked doors, every morning their shoes from the day before are worn through as if they had been danced in all night. None in the king's court have found out how this happens or where the Princesses have been.' **(Rolls up scroll; addresses the men in audience directly.)** If any man among you thinks he is wise enough to uncover the princesses' secret and find out where they dance at night, he shall dwell in the castle three days; at the end of which he must reveal the answer of the mystery to the king. Should he fail in this endeavor, he shall immediately be put to death! **(Black out)**

## Scene 2 - The Throne Room, weeks later

(Optional musical fanfare can cover the transition of scenes. In the darkness, the Chancellor stations himself near the throne. Lights up as King Jasper enters stage L, looking grim and dissatisfied. Chancellor bows deeply as the King sits on his throne. Music fades out.)

**Chancellor:** Your Majesty.

**King:** (Not even looking at him) Where are they?

**Chancellor:** Their royal highnesses are awaiting your good pleasure at this very moment.

**King:** Get them in here *now*.

**Chancellor:** At once, Sire.

(He turns to exit stage right only to see the train of lavishly dressed princesses already streaming in, according to their age.)

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**Chancellor:** Your Majesty, announcing the princess Diamond –

**Diamond:** (Arrives centre stage and drops a curtsy) Good morning, Father.

(She backs up slightly. Each of her sisters follows her lead, making a token curtsy and greeting to the King, and taking a place to Diamond's right as they arrive. The King watches it all in moody silence.)

**Chancellor:** The princess Garnet, the princess Sapphire...

**Garnet:** (Together) Good morning, Father.

**Sapphire:** (Together) Good morning, Father.

**Chancellor:** The princesses Topaz, Opal, Ruby, Emerald, Peridot –

**Amethyst:** (Pauses to correct him) I am Amethyst, Mi'lord.

**Chancellor:** Of course, Princess Amethyst.

(The line keeps moving past; Chancellor hastens to catch up)

**Chancellor:** The princess Citrine, the princess Jade – **(Recognises a forgotten face)** – the princess *Peridot* –

**Peridot:** **(Annoyed)** Thank-you!

**Chancellor:** **(Knows he is missing one - looks offstage expectantly)** And –

**(Pearl, the youngest princess, enters cheerily, finishing the steps of a dainty little dance. She twirls her skirts in front of the Chancellor and sinks in a deep curtsy, looking up at him with a hopeful smile.)**

**Pearl:** Good morning, Mi’lord.

**Chancellor:** **(Clears his throat)** The princess Pearl, Your Majesty.

**(Pearl traipses lightly up to the King and does the same twirl with deep curtsy.)**

**Pearl:** **(Another hopeful smile)** Good morning, Father.

**King:** **(Gravely)** Good morning, Pearl. Go on. **(He waves for her to stand with her sisters. She withdraws slightly subdued to the end of the long array of princesses.)** Lord Chancellor, have you executed that half-wit of a duke as I commanded you?

**Chancellor:** **(Slight bow)** It is done, my liege.

**Topaz:** **(To her sisters)** What?!? The duke is gone! What shall we do??

**Emerald:** We’ll get no more ridiculous compliments about our noses!

**Opal:** There’ll be no more awkward flatteries about our profiles...

**Ruby:** And no more fish breath in our faces.

**Jade:** At least until the next dunce comes!

**(A few princesses giggle; a couple others groan.)**

**King:** **(Furious, stands)** This is not a trivial matter, my *dears!* We are talking about a man’s life that was forfeited by your stubbornness – though it is true, he was not much of a man.

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**Diamond:** Nor were the others, Sire. **(More giggling)**

**King:** **(Coldly; To Chancellor)** And just how many young men have now failed in explaining this riddle of the worn-out shoes?

**Chancellor:** More than a dozen, Your Majesty.

**King:** **(Approaches his daughters, glaring)** Over a dozen lives lost - and their blood is on your heads, for *you* insist on sneaking out somewhere each night to dance your little shoes to pieces – and you will not yield to your king and tell him where you go!

**Citrine:** **(Sweetly; drops a little curtsy)** Yet we are not the ones who do the executing, Father.

**Garnet:** And is it not true, my King, that you lock our chamber door each evening?

**Peridot:** And that you station a guard below our tower window?

**Opal:** **(Sharing a smile with her sisters)** Perhaps we do our dancing in our own sweet chamber.

**King:** **(Paces in front of them to look each in the eye)** And yet not a noise is heard by any in the palace? Nor by the men seeking to expose you?  
**(Each princess returns his gaze, except for Pearl, who drops her eyes quickly.)**

**Jade:** Must we be responsible for the sound sleeping of all in the castle?

**Topaz:** You seem determined to hold us accountable for everything!

**King:** **(Disgusted)** And how many more must die before you will yield to me?

**Diamond:** **(Takes a step towards him)** That is entirely up to you, Sire. We are not simpletons – we see quite clearly that you are trying to force our hand by attaching the death penalty to a failure of uncovering our secret. Yet, we will not feel responsible for any executions *you* order.

**Ruby:** Besides, it is not our fault if all the men who rise to your challenge are so dense!

**King:** **(In a fury)** You are all bewitched!!

**Citrine:** If you say so, Sire.  
**(Pearl is distressed by the King's anger; rushes to him and hugs him)**

**Pearl:** Dear Father, do not rage so. It is true we dance through our shoes each night, but that does not harm anyone. Why not leave us in peace, to do as we will?

**King:** **(Placing a hand on her shoulder)** Because, my Pearl, I am your father – and your King – and I will not be defied by my own household in this way. **(Softening, leans down towards her)** Won't you share with me this strange secret, dear? Who knows that I will not allow you to continue your dancing?

**(Pearl looks up at him earnestly, but conflicted)**

**Diamond:** **(Coaxingly)** Pearl, darling –

**(Pearl sighs, reaches up and kisses her father's cheek, and then goes to Diamond, who holds her close. King Jasper straightens to his full height.)**

**King:** Lord Chancellor, escort the princesses to their chamber and lock them in. They are to be served their meals there and kept within until further notice.

**(Royal fanfare rises again. Some of the younger princesses show chagrin, but the elder ones set the example, bowing confidently to the King as he sweeps out stage left. The ladies follow the Chancellor out stage right in line. Lights out.)**

### Scene 3 - The Woods, a short time later

**(Lights up on a cleared staging area. Gendrick, a former soldier enters stage right, pensive and quiet. As he is making his way left, he stops centre stage to look out over the audience, taking in his surroundings.)**

**Gendrick:** **(To himself)** I must be nearing the castle by now. I am sure I could make it before sundown. Well, Gendrick, is *that* where you are going?

**(An elderly laundress with a basket has entered silently stage left and is observing Gendrick with interest.)**

**Laundress:** Gendrick, is it?

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**(Surprised, Gendrick backs away and stares at the newcomer. She approaches him with a slow but steady gait)**

**Laundress:** You're not quite as tall as the others. Not as tall - nor as proud and fancy from what my old eyes see.

**Gendrick:** **(Relaxing)** And to whom am I being compared, may I ask?

**Laundress:** Only to a dozen plus fools who have come crashing through my woods as of late – headed for King Jasper's palace, drawn like moths to the flame – none of them worthy to be the next king. **(Circles round behind him and looks him over)** No doubt you, too, are set on trying your hand at the mystery of the dancing princesses. Are you a fool as well?

**Gendrick:** **(A chuckle)** I have no doubt, mother. **(Looking around the woods again, as if for the answer to his situation)** I set out on my walk today with no sure plans. I hardly know where my feet have taken me. Though I must admit that I, too, am drawn by the strange mystery – and the extravagant rewards.

**Laundress:** **(Watching him intently)** Then run while you can.

**Gendrick:** **(Makes up his mind)** No, no - I am not one to run, even after my share of battle scars. Since I have wandered this far, I shall go to King Jasper and match wits with the princesses.

**Laundress:** Do you not fear death should you fail, brave wanderer? None of the high-born princes or dukes who have passed this way have ever returned.

**Gendrick:** The wounds I received in my last battle have made me quite useless as a soldier. I have no work, no family – nothing to lose. And although I am not worthy, I believe I would be a just and generous king.

**Laundress:** King Gendrick, eh? **(She makes up *her* mind)** Well then, it is no very hard task to discover the royal secret: only take care not to drink any of the wine which the princesses will bring to you in the evening. Dispose of it somehow, but pretend to drink it all and fall fast asleep at your post in their chamber. Only then will they sneak away through their secret passage.

**Gendrick:** But – you - how do you *know* all this?

**Laundress:** **(Coily)** I am only an aged palace laundress, sir. I know nothing at all. **(Draws out a cloak from the basket and gives it to him)** Here - wear this to hide yourself in the dark. Then you will be able to follow the princesses to their dancing place. **(Begins to exit left)**

**Gendrick:** Wait - good laundress - why are you helping me?

**Laundress:** Who wouldn't want to aid a future king? Come with me now. You must present yourself to King Jasper. **(Lights down as they exit)**

#### **Scene 4 – A Secret Passage, that night**

**(Optional furtive background music comes up. Lights up low - blue lights optional. We hear the rustle of skirts as Diamond and Ruby lead their sisters onstage quietly. Non-speaking princesses should enter and exit by slipping/twirling/dancing behind speaking princesses throughout the dialogue below.**

**Ruby:** You are certain the soldier is asleep?

**Diamond:** Snoring like something dreadful!

**Peridot:** And he is a rather old soldier - he must be nearly forty! So even if we had not given him his sleeping draught, he'd sleep soundly enough, I warrant.

**Amethyst:** And thus another fellow who might have done a wiser thing than to lose his life this way! Will these men never learn?

**(Diamond remains at centre stage as Ruby, Peridot, and others pass by her to exit right. Pearl enters last with Emerald, Garnet, and Sapphire)**

**Pearl:** Emerald, I still think we should confess all to father! I don't know how it is that you are all so happy while I feel very uneasy; I am sure some mischance will befall us.

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**Emerald:** We cannot tell, dear Pearl. If we break our promise to the princes from the wood, they won't let us come visit the underground castle anymore.

**Sapphire:** We'd never get to see them again! You wouldn't want *that*, would you?

**Pearl:** No – no, I would miss our dances with them so much.

**Garnet:** Then stand firm and do not be afraid; have you forgotten how many kings' sons have already watched in vain?

**(The hooded figure of Gendrick slips in upstage left, then stays still as a rock)**

**Diamond:** **(Taking Pearl's hand)** Come now, darling; the moon is high – we must hurry along or we'll be late!

**(The remaining princesses quietly dance out stage right - making a journey of it - leaving Sapphire, Diamond and Pearl in the back.**

**Gendrick begins to follow, slinking along upstage. Pearl hears something.)**

**Pearl:** Oh, Diamond, all is not right; someone is following us! I am certain I heard a noise.

**(The princesses freeze and listen, but hear nothing)**

**Sapphire:** You silly creature! It is nothing but the wind coming through a chink in the wall. **(Exits)**

**Diamond:** **(Holding Pearl's shoulders)** Banish all your fears, little one. This night is no different than any other night! Let me see your pretty smile, for our twelve princes await us to dance the night away. **(Pearl manages a small smile)** Come, darling, come!

**(Diamond pulls Pearl out. Gendrick steps forward to centre stage - pulls back his hood to watch.)**

**Gendrick:** Enjoy your dances, Princess. You may wish me dead, but this mystery is soon over. **(He exits; lights down.)**

## Scene 5 - The Throne Room

**(Three days later. SFX. Royal fanfare. Lights up on King Jasper sitting on his throne with the Chancellor at his side. The princesses enter from stage right, oldest to youngest, and assume their original positions. Richly dressed, Gendrick enters last from the right and stands centre stage, in front of the line of princesses, if needed. The music fades as all bow to the King. Gendrick remains kneeling.)**

**King:** Soldier Gendrick, your three days in my palace have passed. Rise and present to your king the answer to the secret of the princesses' worn-out shoes – **(Beat)** – or face the fate prepared for you. **(Gendrick rises)** Where do my twelve daughters dance at night?

**Gendrick:** Every night is the same, my liege. They dance in an underground castle with twelve princes from the wood.

**(Quiet surprise and dismay from the princesses)**

**King:** An - underground castle? Below the forests?

**Gendrick:** Yes, Sire, I have seen it these three nights in a row. It is elaborately carved out in cave rock – and was not to be known by we who are above ground.

**Diamond:** **(Angrily; to Gendrick)** What stories one might tell to save one's life, Soldier Gendrick!

**Gendrick:** **(Calmly)** What lengths one might go to dance with a prince, your Highness.

**King:** **(Pleasantly surprised)** And tell me, Soldier, how do the princesses *get* to this underground castle?

**Gendrick:** There is a secret trapdoor hidden in your daughters' chamber, leading to an ancient passage out into the forest. Each night, the princes from the hidden castle bring your daughters down into their cavern and row them across a secluded lake to the entrance of their palace. **(Pulls a golden cup from his garments)** And from this richly furnished palace, I have brought a golden cup as proof of my tale.

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**(Gendrick hands King Jasper the cup and backs away to stage left, bowing)**

**King:** **(Stands, surveying the crestfallen faces of his daughters)** Well, ladies? Do you confess? Do we finally have the truth before us? **(No response)** You have certainly proven yourselves to be both selfish and untrustworthy; and when I investigate this story – and find it to be true – I shall have to deal with you all, including those presumptuous princes.

**Pearl:** **(Rushing to him)** Oh, dear Father, please forgive our silliness. We have behaved badly - it's true - but the princes were so wonderfully kind when we met them in the wood one day. They showed us amazing, beautiful things we'd never seen before - and made us *promise* to visit them each night and never speak of it to anyone.

**King:** **(Gently)** Sometimes, Pearl, it is worse to keep a promise than to break it. **(Turns to Gendrick)** As for you, clever soldier, you have earned yourself the right of choosing a wife from amongst these foolish daughters of mine – and are hereby declared my heir.

**Gendrick:** **(Bowing deeply)** Thank you, King Jasper. I will seek to be worthy of the honors you have bestowed on me. And as I am a "rather old soldier," I will take the eldest to be my queen. **(Approaches Diamond)** If it is adventure that you crave, Mi'lady, I will ensure that you have no lack. And perhaps - you may teach this old man – to dance.

**(He smiles at her and bows, as if asking for a dance at that moment. She looks back uncertainly; then a small smile cracks her face. As if accepting a dare, she bobs a little curtsy. Lights out.)**