

An ancient feud rends the calm cobbled streets of fair Verona. A young lord, son of the house of Montague, swears he will never love any other but Rosaline, a fair maiden who does not love him back. Unrequited, the young Montague is encouraged by his close friend to visit a masquerade, where he meets a lass who enraptures his heart's passions anew—but alas, she is of the rivaled house of Capulet!

William Shakespeare is the most influential author of the English language, establishing idioms and themes which have endured to modern day, and will likely endure for as long as the English language is spoken. William Shakespeare was born in Stratford-upon-Avon, England, and wrote approximately 39 plays between the years of 1564 and 1616.

OTHER CLASSICS:

HAMLET

A MIDSUMMER NIGHT'S DREAM

KING HENRY THE EIGHTH

THE TEMPEST

KING RICHARD THE THIRD

THE TAMING OF THE SHREW

MACBETH

KING LEAR

THE FIRST PART OF KING HENRY THE FOURTH

THE SECOND PART OF KING HENRY THE FOURTH

OTHELLO, THE MOOR OF VENICE

LOVE'S LABOUR'S LOST

THE COMEDY OF ERRORS

KING RICHARD THE SECOND

CYMBELINE

ANTONY AND CLEOPATRA

ALL'S WELL THAT ENDS WELL

THE WINTER'S TALE

CORIOLANUS

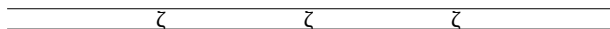
ROMEO

&

JULIET

A FANTASY NOVELIZATION

WITH QUOTATION FROM THE TRAGICALL HISTORYE
OF ROMEUS AND JULIET, TRANSLATED INTO ENGLISH
FOR THE FIRST TIME BY ARTHUR BROOKE



*For those beloved lost
and those beloved newer found.*

*But that a joy past joy calls out on me,
It were a grief, so brief to part with thee.*

*There is beyond the Alps, a town of ancient fame,
Whose bright renown yet shineth clear: Verona men it name;
Built in a happy time, built on a fertile soil,
Maintained by the heavenly fates, and by the townish toil.
The fruitful hills above, the pleasant vales below,
The silver stream with channel deep, that thro' the town doth
flow,
The store of springs that serve for use, and eke for ease,
And other more commodities, which profit may and please,—
Eke many certain signs of things betid of old,
To fill the hungry eyes of those that curiously behold,
Do make this town to be preferred above the rest
Of Lombard towns, or at the least, comparéd with the best.*

Glossary:

eke: also

PRECEDING THE FIRST ACT, THE PROLOGUE

TWAS a violent stormy night at the chapel. Friar Theodore knelt in prayer among candles, mumbling the words aloud. "Please O Lord, may that our present sacrifice be enough." Outside, a crack of thunder sounded. "Poor Lucia, poor Cicilia, poor Marsilia, plucked up by the tornado yesternight. Their mother and father mourn greatly. You hear them. Let this be enough. Please. Please." Outside, another crack of thunder sounded. The church walls groaned under the pressure of the wind. Something that was caught in the wind rapped against the church wall, knocking, knocking. "Please, O Lord, let—"

Friar Theodore paused. With breath held, he listened, hearing past the pelting rain, past the groaning walls.

The rapping outside was not some wind-caught object knocking at the walls, but a visitor knocking at the door. Friar Theodore arose from his kneeling, his joints stiff from so long spent stooped as he had been. With haste, he took a candle onto a chamberstick and went up the aisle between the pews, exited to the antechamber, and went towards the knocking at the door. The door he opened, and outside in the dark of the stormy night, for a moment before the howling wind foisted its way in and blew out his candle, there outside by the candlelight Friar Theodore saw a woman as old as he was, dressed in soaked brown robes, hood drawn.

"Haste ye, inside, inside," Friar Theodore beckoned, holding the door open for the woman.

She shuffled quickly in, and Friar Theodore shut the door behind her. Gingerly, he put a hand to her cheek, and recoiled at her cold skin—cold as stone, nearly cold as metal.

“To the hearth, to the hearth,” he encouraged, and offered her an arm, helping her along. In a cozy receiving chambers, Friar Theodore coaxed the fire in the hearth from embers to a blaze, and then went to find the woman a dry change of clothing. In his cell, from his trunk, he found a spare brown robes, quite like the ones he was already wearing—they were also quite like the ones she wore, except dry. He returned with them, offered them, and left her to her privacy to change.

“I am decent, brother,” she called.

He entered the receiving room. She had changed into the dry clothes offered, and had also pulled up a pair of cushioned, high-backed chairs to the hearth. She sat in one of the chairs, her pile of wet clothes on the hearthstones at her feet. “Please, come sit,” she offered. “May I know your name, brother?”

He took the seat across from her. The heat of the hearth radiated over him comfortably. “I am Friar Theodore.”

“Well met. I am Friar Elizabeth.”

“Ha! Indeed?”

“Quite so,” Elizabeth affirmed, her tone quite less merry than that of her contemporary. “Male and female, created he them, no?”

Theodore sobered, and nodded. “Indeed. Yes, indeed, and apologies. This is not typical here, is all. Do you hail from afar?”

“Quite far.” Within her closed mouth, Elizabeth ran a tongue around each of her two pointed fangs. “I come bearing a gift.”

“Oh?”

“I shall but bestow the gift tonight and be gone tomorrow. You have read the scripture, yes?”

“Read it!”

"You are across the scripture, then."

"Across it in any direction you like, front and back."

"Recount for me the fate of Abel," Elizabeth requested.

"Slain by Cain, his brother, Adam's firstborn. The first murder." Theodore squinted. "What mean you by this?"

"You recount the death of Abel truly, but not the ultimate fate of Abel. Know ye no further?"

Friar Theodore's brow furrowed. "Abel was buried by Cain in a field."

"Slain, and then buried in the desert," Elizabeth said, leaning forward in her seat towards Theodore. "His blood soaked into the sand, seeping, crying out for the Lord to hear. His unmarked grave stepped on by a giant for the duration of the flood, the giant's head above the water to breathe, the giant's sole at the bottom of the waters to keep dry Abel's sandy grave."

"Miss Elizabeth, this is nowhere in the—"

"I assure you, tis. But I go on: the waters recede, generations pass, and Peter, apostle, saint, first pope, is building a cathedral. Abel's grave is exhumed, the bloodied sand collected into a vase and brought to Rome, where it becomes the blood for Christ's hands and feet on a stained glass rendition of the crucifixion—"

"Miss Elizabeth, you—"

"Allow me but another moment and I shall be done: this is not blasphemy, only truth you are not yet aware of."

Friar Theodore's eye twitched, but he allowed the visitor to go on.

"As I was saying: Abel's blood in the sand, blown and formed to Jesus's blood in Saint Peter's cathedral. It was said that those who looked upon the stained glass window were stricken with horror—looking into the blood of Jesus Christ, they saw reflected every horrible thing in their life past, and every horrible thing to come. This lasted some centuries until, as windows are wont to do, one day the window broke, and the glass was swept away."

"Finished?"

“But a breath more. The glass was swept away, but the pieces are since refound, and reformed into a new shape.”

Elizabeth reached down to the pile of her rainsoaked robes, and from among them, lifted out a spherical object, wrapped in cloth and tied with twine.

Theodore leaned back in his chair away from it.

The corner of Elizabeth’s mouth quirked into a smile. “The Scrying Glass of Abel’s Blood, once a window, is now an orb. Look into it, and it will first show you the death of your firstborn son, if you are to have one. After that, its eye will wander through place and date more freely.”

Theodore turned his head away, and crossed his arms. “T’would be no divining to show the death of my firstborn. Tis passed.”

“So you would know if I speak the truth?”

Theodore sneered. “Tempt me not to turn you back to the rain.”

The two sat unspeaking as the hearth crackled and the rain outside pelted down.

After some time, Theodore asked, “Why would you bring such a thing to me?”

“It is rather obsessed with these environs. Whenever idle, untasked, it shows Verona. If it wills itself here, I would it were put in good hands.”

Again, quiet.

Again, Theodore broke the quiet: “What symbolism is this, anyhow? Abel was the secondborn. Why should his blood show the firstborn’s death?”

“If you wish me to interpret, I’ll gladly guess. Though I must place emphasis, I come here first to report, then only to interpret if pressed.”

“Go on and interpret.”

“I would take it that Abel wanted to see the death of Cain, the firstborn who murdered him.”

“Aye. The same is what I thought.” Theodore sighed. “Show me the orb.”

With both hands, Friar Elizabeth extended out the cloth-swaddled sphere. With both hands, Friar Theodore received it. He unknotted the twine and removed the cloth. Underneath was an orb of dark red glass, cloudy on the inside. Then, as a fog suddenly lifting, Friar Theodore was looking back ten years past, at a scene of himself at his ailing son's bedside, and the final words of them both, and then the final breath. The friar's son went limp, and the friar bowed his head in tearful, mourning prayer.

In the receiving room with the strange visitor, Friar Theodore wept again. He wrapped the sphere back in its cloth, and held it on his lap.

Marking the hour, Friar Theodore arose, and prepared a chamber for Friar Elizabeth to sleep in. In the morning, before Friar Theodore woke, Friar Elizabeth was departed, on her journey back far, far to the east, to a city on a coast, near Moscow. Friar Theodore, left in fair Verona with the Scrying Glass of Abel's Blood, stowed the orb in a hidden place under the cellar stairs. There would be much prayer and consulting to do over the legitimacy of the thing. In the meantime, the friar set out over the rain-wet grass to see whether his prayers for mercy from the storms of the night before had been answered.

As he set out from the church's yard, he happened by Friar Caleb, leading a flock of young boys from Verona to the abbey for their lessons that day. Lowering himself to a playful stoop, Friar Theodore locked eyes with the young boy of the house Montague, who stood halfway behind Friar Caleb, smiling as he hid. Friar Theodore darted around Friar Caleb with elderly haste, and hoisted the young Montague boy up into the air, who squealed and laughed before being set down again.

Friar Theodore knelt before the boy, both of them dappled under the swaying shade of the many trees on the church's yard. "Which of the Lord's creatures have you brought for me today, Young Montague?"

From his sleeve, Young Montague produced a lumpy toad and held it out for the friar.

“My! Was he hard to catch?”

Young Montague shook his head vehemently.

“You’re faster?”

Young Montague nodded.

“Let’s leave him to his business now, and you go see how fast you can catch up with Friar Caleb.”

Young Montague set the toad on the grass, and then ran to catch up with the other boys. Halfway there, Young Capulet leapt down from a tree branch hanging overhead and whacked Young Montague with a stick, breaking the stick in half on the impact.

“Ay, me!” Young Montague cried, and reached out and slapped Young Capulet. Young Capulet grabbed Young Montague by the wrist, and dragged him off to a bush, and there the two knelt in front of each other, Young Montague’s side stinging from the impact of the stick, Young Capulet’s cheek stinging from the impact of the slap.

“My father hates Montagues,” Young Capulet said in a whisper as he caught his breath. “He said they don’t have a wit between them. He said they’d wear their shoes on the wrong feet if not for their servants. He said the only good parts of their bloodline are from them bugging their horses.”

“My father hates Capulets,” Young Montague returned, also in a whisper. “He said their brains are as scrambled as their faces. He said their hands stink of sour wine and cheese. He said they’re as dull as they are loud.”

“My father said if I killed you I would get away with it.”

“My father said if you lay a hand on me, the law would be on my side for any Capulets I killed for the next hour.”

“I don’t hate you though,” Young Capulet said, as he said most days to Young Montague in this bush.

“Nor I you,” said Young Montague, likewise.

The two of them grabbed each other's hands in a truce. Then they scrambled out and ran into the church for their lessons. In the mornings they learned scriptures, and in the afternoons they learned the natural sciences, with an hour in between for lunch and play. That morning's lesson was on the birthright of Jacob and Esau. That noon the meal was stew, and the game was hide and seek. Searching for a spot to hide, Young Montague found his way under the cellar stairs. Tucked away and hidden, Young Montague found the hidden orb, swaddled in cloth. He unwrapped it and looked into its cloudy red depths, which parted to show a tomb, and a young man drinking from a flask; the man held another figure close to him, though the other was obscured in the periphery of the red clouds. With some final words spoken, the young man fell dead, embracing the figure of the other.

Certain that he had found something that he wished to study more closely, Young Montague stowed the object back under the cellar stairs for the time being, and then later that night, snuck into the church alone, and left with a swaddled orb stolen in secrecy.

All the hours of the next day, and the next, and so forth, Young Montague sat at the foot of his bed, craning down at the glass. He saw a gaunt old figure frequently, and realized, as the interim years were fleshed out, that the gaunt old figure was himself. He realized that the man whose death he had seen in the tomb, that that was his own son, not yet born, but eventually to be born and to grow and then to die, and already Young Montague, not yet a man himself, had seen it. Not for a certainty, so far as Young Montague could know, but still, he had seen it portrayed. The glass did not show the future only. At times it showed other rooms of the manor: maids cleaning, a servant tending the horses, his mother and father conversing in the receiving room, though the orb did not give volume to it.

Months went by, Young Montague alone most days in his room, skipping his lessons, learning instead from scrying, scrying, scrying, skipping his meals and becoming gaunt and hunched.

One day, the orb parted its red clouds to show someone Young Montague had not seen in some time. It was another young boy: Young Capulet. His friend held a fire poker, brandished it, swung it—it was not in play, no game. The boy screamed as he lashed out, tears streaking down his face, and then he turned and was running down a hall. Young Montague marked the time of day shown in the orb: it was night, just fallen. He looked up from the orb and marked the time out his own window: it was evening, falling.

Young Montague looked back down into the orb, seeking guidance. Three images were shown, one after the other. The first image was of his father's enchanted sword, hung on the wall behind the lord's chair in his office. The second image, his father's horse. The third image was the manor of the Capulets—twas an image from later in the day, as the sun was setting, and a short figure rode on horseback up to the gate, armed with an enchanted sword. Young Montague swallowed nervously, recalling all the terrible things Young Capulet's father had said about Montagues—and here he was going to be, riding up to his doorstep.

And yet, he felt almost no choice in his fate. Already, it seemed sealed. Up the steps he crept to his father's office, avoiding the spots on the stairs that creaked. He stood and stared at the sword for a moment. Around the guard, seven runes were engraved, with dots in between most runes. The wishing sword, it was called. It had a soul of its own. A kind soul.

Raising his voice barely loud enough for the sword to hear, Young Montague asked, "May I wield you?"

Three of the wishing sword's symbols glowed, and the blade vibrated in an agreeable, harmonic hum.

Young Montague stepped up onto his father's chair and lifted the sword off of its mount on the wall. It resonated briefly in his hand, and a shiver ran through him. He lifted off the scabbard as well, affixed it to his side, and stowed the wishing sword for now.

With this deed done, he crept back down the stairs and out to the stables. There in the waning glow of late evening, Young Montague went to one of the horses, gently approaching her. After assuring her of who he was, he leapt up onto the mare—as a Montague, he had learned to ride at the same time he had learned to walk. With a click produced in the side of his mouth, the mare began to saunter forth, out of the stables, into the cobbled Verona streets, hooves tapping over the stones.

As the mare walked, Young Montague peered down into the orb, glancing up only occasionally to direct the mare. All throughout the Capulet manor, he was shown similar sights. In the foyer, a guardsman was collapsed on the ground, snoring, and a demon crouched over him, hands moving in strange motions over the sleeping guard's face—the guard occasionally let loose an immense twitch and a yelp, a glimpse of his nightmares. In the cellars a maid was entranced similarly, and in the kitchen a cook, and in the armory a servant, and in the master bedroom, both the lord and lady of the house Capulet writhed in nightmares, as a demon on each side of the bed held them captive. Guiding the mare onto the street on which the Capulet manor stood, the orb showed an image of the guardsman a short time ago, being accosted by the demon, struggling with it, and then being overpowered and entranced. The sleeping was not some general effect on the manor, at least, and needed to be induced. Lastly before arriving at the gate, the orb showed an image of a ritual being performed in some inner room of the manor, glowing circles made upon the floor, and a shimmering gate to Hell itself opened up. The caster in the center, the orb seemed

to wish to show, but could not part the red clouds which obscured them.

Young Montague swallowed. He stowed the orb, dismounted from the mare, and hitched her to the gate.

He unsheathed the wishing sword, and lifted it up before himself to speak with it. "I wish that if I swing you, you will strike at the demons, but at no man or woman, not even a Capulet."

The wishing sword hummed in affirmation.

Keeping the sword in hand, Young Montague dashed forward over the Capulet yard. Knowing that the front door was no option with the demon perched over the guardsman beyond, Young Montague looked down into the orb and saw a side entrance, free of demonic presences. Young Montague skulked around the manor, crouching under window sills and avoiding stepping on dead leaves, and arrived soundly at the minor entrance. With careful attention, Young Montague opened the door, and was inside.

The manor was dark. Every candle and lantern was extinguished, and yet Young Montague was not terribly bothered, as the orb's images glowed well enough to the observer's sight, and Young Montague found that he was shown himself when peering down into the orb: himself in the manor, peering down into an orb. In the image he stepped forward, and at the very same moment, Young Montague stepped forward in the exact same way. He fell into a trance of it, and in this strange way was led through the halls of the manor, around each threat of demon, until arriving at yet another room which to his own sight was black as pitch, but in the glow of the orb, was revealed to have two couches, a grand chair, a fireplace, a low table, thick carpeting, and some fine décor. In the orb, Young Montague spotted someone entering the room from the opposite side at the same time as he—this person lashed out, swinging a metal object wildly. Young Montague raised the wishing sword, while never breaking sight of the

orb, knowing on well-ingrained instinct that the orb's sight far outclassed his own. The wishing sword and the weapon of the assailant clanged off of one another, the sword humming. The assailant swung again, and again the wishing sword blocked it. Young Montague thrust the wishing sword forward to strike, but the wishing sword moved askance in his hand, tumbling away from the intended target. The assailant wailed "Have at ye!" in the high voice of a young boy, and it was only then that Young Montague looked closer into the orb, and saw that the other figure here in the dark was Young Capulet.

"Peace!" Young Montague cried. "Peace, peace, tis I!"

Young Capulet was still and silent for a moment, before asking, "Truly?"

"Truly," Young Montague assured.

"I wondered if you had died," Young Capulet said, and was in tears. "You haven't been to lessons in months. How ill had you fallen?"

Young Montague teared a bit at his friend's emotions. "Twas no illness. I found..." Rather than attempting to explain, Young Montague held up the orb. "Look."

Young Capulet laughed. "At what? Tis dark in here. Mayhap I can look, in the most literal sense, but I assure you that whatsoever I look at, I cannot see."

Young Montague took Young Capulet's hand and laid it on the orb. "Look upon this."

Young Capulet felt the thing. "Tis a cold thing. I assure you, I take you at your word that it looks wonderful, but truly, I can see nothing."

The Scrying Glass of Abel's Blood, finding no firstborn son in Young Capulet's future, could not show the first image that it desired to, and so showed nothing at all to the boy, nor would it ever.

Far from offended, Young Montague was bolstered with wonder at what special trait had singled him out as the one with the ability to scry. "We are safe here at present. Sit with me here," Young Montague said. As they sat, he

placed the orb on the ground between them. He peered into it, and shared with his friend what he was seeing: "The floor above us, farther on the east side of the manor, someone is performing a ritual. It has opened a gate to Hell. Demons patrol the halls, though they focus on the highest floor right now."

"What of my mother and father?"

"Enranced. They are alive though."

"Go on, where you were."

"The figure is done with the ritual. He's leaving the room with the gate. He is..." The image in the orb went away from the figure, and for a moment, showed nothing. As the red clouds gathered, the glow of the image faded from Young Montague's sight, and he was left to appreciate the true darkness of the room.

There in the dark, Young Montague and Young Capulet could hear footsteps above, of demon and whatever else.

The red clouds parted to show the mare hitched to the fence outside the Capulet manor. A number of Verona's watchmen were crowded around, closely observing the crest of the house Montague on the horse's saddle. A few seemed to be investigating other things about the perimeter of the Capulet manor's fence, though they were shrouded away from Young Montague's sight.

"Listen—"

"One moment," Young Montague insisted, trying to focus the edges, to see what else the watchmen were examining.

"Fool, listen—"

"One *moment!*" Young Montague hissed.

Whatever else it was that the watchmen had found, it was sufficient that they began marching into the manor. The red clouds fell upon the orb, and it was dark.

At the door of the room, Young Montague heard heavy footsteps fast approaching, and a hissing, huffing breathing, too deep to be human. Left in the dark, Young Montague stood from sitting on the floor, leaving the orb

on the ground. Trusting the wishing sword could see better than himself, he drew the blade and drove its point towards the oncoming opponent. The blade struck true, and Young Montague could not see, but felt as the sword pushed through the demon's body. The demon hissed as Young Montague withdrew the blade and then struck out again, this time striking at the creature's head. A sharp crack resounded through the room, and the creature thumped to the ground, hissing no more.

Young Montague sheathed his sword. Young Capulet reached out in the dark for his friend. There in the dark, the two held one another, catching their breath while also trying to keep quiet, to listen for anything else.

On the ground floor below, a clamor of footsteps and shouting voices could be heard. "Watchmen below," Young Montague mentioned, to which Young Capulet responded, "Aye. They've announced as much several times." "Oh." "No trouble. You were reasonably preoccupied."

Reminded of the orb, Young Montague removed himself from the lad of the other house, and felt at the floor for his relic. "Where is it?" he asked aloud, as he felt about farther and farther from where he had left it before. The floor was thickly carpeted, making the orb unlikely to have rolled.

"Do you know exactly where you left it?"

"Have you a light?"

"Aye, I'll return with one."

Young Capulet departed as Young Montague continued to search. When a lantern was brought in, it was clear to see that the orb was nowhere on the floor. Young Montague felt an aversion to looking at the demon's body, though this sense of aversion also compelled him to look it over more than anything else in the room, to be sure that the orb wasn't missed laid against it. The orb was nowhere, though.

All at once, Young Montague was stricken with realization as to why Young Capulet had so quickly volunteered to go away and fetch a light. "Thief!"

Young Capulet reeled as though smacked. “*Thief?* Stealing into a house you don’t belong to, spouting nonsense about a magic ball, and now accusing *me* of thievery! Ay me, a Montague indeed!” The footfalls of the watchmen were ascending the stairs.

“I wish that when my sword strikes towards thee, Capulet, it will strike any thieves dead!”

Immediately the wishing sword cacophonized disharmoniously and rattled with such violence that it fell from Young Montague’s recoiling hand.

With the clamor of footsteps nearing, Young Montague collected up his sword and dashed out of the room in one direction, and Young Capulet huffed out of the room in the direction opposite. A party of watchmen charged into the room, looking about for any of either house. Seeing no one, they examined the demon’s corpse briefly, and then charged onwards to continue the search. The room was still for a moment, with only muffled stomps and shouts from elsewhere, and the tittering of nightingales and insects outside. From behind the couch, the young prince Escalus quietly peeked his head out, and then emerged, the Scrying Glass of Abel’s Blood in hand.

Into the room skulked the prince’s father, glancing about over his shoulder and every which way. Seeing his son, the king flashed a smile, baring his fangs. The prince of scales flashed a smile back, showing fangs much the same. Having been instructed not to look at the orb himself, the prince averted his gaze as he handed the orb to his father.

Knowing of the relic and its properties, the king steeled himself, taking a good look at his firstborn son before him. When he was ready, he stared down into the scrying glass’s depths, and after witnessing an image of an old man taking his final breaths, the orb showed the king an image of Young Capulet crying in the garden, and Young Montague crying as he rode through the dark Verona streets on horseback. Reaching years into the future, the orb showed

two figures, one the fruit of Montague, the other the fruit of Capulet, dying together in a catacomb.

I

ACT ONE
CONTAINING FIVE SCENES

*There were two ancient stocks, which Fortune high did place
Above the rest, indued with wealth, and nobler of their race,
Loved of the common sort, loved of the prince alike,
And like unhappy were they both, when Fortune list to strike;
Whose praise, with equal blast, Fame in her trumpet blew;
The one was clepéd Capulet, and th'other Montague.*

ACT I.

SCENE I.

BENVOLIO snapped awake, sitting bolt upright out of bed. He'd had no nightmare, just a sensation that he'd fallen and needed to catch himself, and now, as a result, he was certainly up. He took stock of his whereabouts. The sun was not yet risen: only the faint glow of night came in through his bedroom window. By the faint light from the window, and by the warmth and the sounds of snoring, he could discern that he was not alone in his bed: also here were Abraham and Balthasar, servants in the house Montague, though to this Montague, more friend than servant. A disorienting fog hung about Benvolio's thoughts. There was an empty bottle of wine pressed against his foot, and at a glance, there were three more strewn on the floor.

Benvolio settled back into the warm pocket of blankets that he had slept in beside Balthasar. He laid there and closed his eyes and breathed and thought of sleep, but there was none more to be found for him, it seemed. He was up now.

Gingerly, Benvolio exited the bed, put on a robe, and left the bedroom, carefully closing the door behind himself. He made his way to the bathing room and drew a bath. As the water came in, Benvolio tried to recall how the night before had gone, but beyond a certain point his memory on the matter was absent. He had no doubt it had been merry, though. Perhaps one of the two others would be able to recount the details.

Benvolio smelled at his body before getting into the bath. Pressing his nose along his forearm, he came to a spot that smelled strongly of men. His hands appeared clean but were odorously filthy. He lifted a foot to his hand in order to feel it, and found the foot soft. Sitting on the floor and contorting himself to smell his sole, there was a distinct scent of flowery oils. It could be certain that he had indulged Abraham in his predilections then, though there was still no memory of it in Benvolio's bemused head.

Hopping into the frigid bath, Benvolio hissed out a breath through his gritted teeth. Once acclimated, he took to himself with soap and cloth, until his scent was becoming of an upstanding young man, the nephew to a lord no less.

Body cleaned and dried, hair and beard combed, Benvolio exited the bathing room and returned to his chamber to dress. He made quiet work of it, mindful of the other two still snoring, enwrapped peacefully together in a nest of cozy blankets and cozy scents. Benvolio himself had something of a headache, and the mental fog persisted. He dressed in attire that was various shades of brown cloth, well stitched, though not grandiose. Becoming, but anonymous. He put on a belt and a scabbard, and unsheathed the blade an inch or two to admire the thing in quiet respect. Seven runes were engraved about the guard, with dots in between most. The wishing sword, gifted to him by his uncle last Christmas. *This sword and I have never gotten along much*, the Lord Montague had said. With a glint of admiration breaking through his visage, the Lord Montague had added, *Tis a kind soul, this blade. I know it will resonate with you more favorably.*

As Benvolio quietly admired the blade, a few of its runes dimly lighted up, and the blade gave a faint, pleasant hum.

Benvolio ran his thumb over the handle appreciatively, and then returned the blade securely into its scabbard.

Quietly, Benvolio exited his chambers, went out to the stables to say good morning to the horses, and then left on his own feet into the streets of Verona. The sun had still not yet risen. Benvolio walked westwardly at an unhurried pace, occasionally passing by another early riser, listening to the tittering of the birds. Benvolio reminded himself that all of it was a lovely noise, even though at the moment, it made his head throb.

Passing through Verona, Benvolio found himself away from the city proper, into a quieter place. A grove of sycamores. The gentle noise of the wind passing through them did his mind well. On a winding trail in their midst, Benvolio stopped to listen, appreciate, eyes closed, head bowed.

Wshhhhhh... Wshhhhhh... Wshhhhhh...

After some minutes, Benvolio noticed another noise in the sycamore grove. The gentle tap and crunch of footsteps, and a soft sniffing to accompany it. Benvolio opened his eyes, lifted his head, and in the distance, he beheld his cousin Romeo, walking and wiping away tears. Romeo, noticing Benvolio at the same time, suddenly stood more upright, lowered his hand away from his face, and hurried along.

Sensing wisdom in his crestfallen cousin's pace, Benvolio hurried along as well, towards the Calf and Crow, an inn nestled in the sycamore grove outside Verona. Opening the door and closing it behind himself was as though stepping into a pleasant memory.

"By the Lord's good grace, the sun not yet risen and already a friendly face," the innkeeper greeted.

Benvolio took the man's offered hand and curtsied to kiss it. He then smiled up at him warmly. "Your cooking could cure Loki of his enpoisoned rash and Sisyphus of his sore feet. I would be a fool to seek such a miracle elsewhere."

“Merry, but tis early. I’ve nothing started, but allow me to amend this tragedy.”

“Bless you sir. Is there any labor needs doing here in the meantime?”

“Aye, but not for a lord’s nephew as yourself. You already pay me too much in compliment and in currency. Sit, sit.”

Benvolio took the innkeeper’s instructions, and had a seat in a cushioned chair in a cool, quiet corner. A fireplace on the other side of the room crackled. Occasional floorboard creaks and footsteps could be heard from the rooms above. By and by, a smell of God’s own food came creeping into the compact common room. Summoned by it, two patrons from the rooms above lighted down the creaking stairway, and sat themselves at the common room’s table. Benvolio greeted them, and all had a pleasant chat before the innkeeper emerged from the kitchen to set on the table pitchers of water and pitchers of juice. With a second trip, the innkeeper emerged from the kitchen holding a steaming platter of toasted bread, steamed vegetables, and fried potatoes, all doused in melted cheeses, oils, and herbs. Benvolio came to the table, and the four of them feasted.

At the end of the meal, the fog in Benvolio’s mind was cleared, his headache was gone, and his muscles were no longer sore. He leaned back in his chair, swimming in the intangible delights of his new wellness. “I am cured,” he announced to the innkeeper. “And I should be off. Thank you and bless you, sir.” Benvolio stood and made his departure, shaking the innkeeper’s hand and giving him his payment on the way.

Benvolio walked back into town with health anew, this time truly appreciating the birds’ tittering as he walked through the Verona streets, and the tittering of all the men, women, and children that were now about in the newly sun-blessed morning. As he rounded a corner into a public square, he spotted across the square Abraham and

Balthasar, who were facing two figures in vibrantly colorful clothing. Capulets. His breath caught as he noticed all four men with their hands on their hilts. At that moment, Balthasar spotted Benvolio, then leaned over to Abraham and whispered of it. The next moment, all four swords were drawn, and a fight had begun.

From across the square, Benvolio began walking hurriedly forward to break it up. As he went he drew the wishing sword, and petitioned it, "I wish you would strike not at their flesh, but only at their steel."

The wishing sword hummed its agreement with a shared urgency. Wish deigned, Benvolio broke into a sprint, and leapt into the fray of swords, the dizzying flashes of steel poking and riposting, swishing, spinning. "Part, fools!" Benvolio urged, swinging the wishing sword to beat down the blades of the Montagues and the Capulets alike. "Stow your swords! You know not what you do!"

In the midst of it, a heavy hand fell upon Benvolio's shoulder, and spun him away from the fight. Benvolio found himself face to face with an imposing figure in colorful garb, near seven feet tall in his high-soled boots, near eight feet tall counting his hat. Tybalt, nephew of the Lady Capulet, as sharp in his fashion as in his bastardry.

Tybalt took a step back and drew his sabre. "What," he began, "art thou drawn among these heartless hinds? Turn thee Benvolio, and look upon thy death!"

"I do but keep the peace," Benvolio assured. "Put up thy sword, or manage it to part these men with me."

"What, drawn and talk of peace! I hate the word, as I hate Hell, all Montagues, and thee. Have at thee, coward!"

On the sole of a boot Tybalt spun wildly in a circle, and with the momentum of the spin, hacked down with his sword towards Benvolio. Fearing his own kind blade might break from blocking such a strike, Benvolio leapt backwards. Tybalt did not slow for a moment, but carried his momentum to rush forward, continuing his pursuit with a lunge. Benvolio moved to knock the attack away,

but such a parry would prove unneeded: before Tybalt's lunge could land, a citizen leapt in and punched the tall nobleman into the side of the head, knocking him off balance. Benvolio winced, seeing the blow. All at once, the square was a frenzy of punches and kicks and grapples, shouting, jeering, shoving. As Benvolio made his way through the turmoil back towards Abraham and Balthasar, he spotted off at one edge of the square Lord and Lady Montague themselves, and at another edge of the square, Lord and Lady Capulet. Each lord was moving to join the foray, but each lady held him back. Shouted the Lord Montague, "Thou villain Capulet! Hold me not, let me go." The lady in turn, "Thou shalt not stir one foot to seek a foe!"

Muskets rang out. All in the square dropped to the ground covering their heads, or fled off down the streets away. Tybalt was first up to a knee, and then to standing. Benvolio rose likewise, and then the lords and ladies. Benvolio looked about, and saw that the muskets seemed not to have been aimed to kill, but rather aimed into the air to warn. From one side of the square, Prince Escalus marched into the center, flanked by a dozen musketeers.

"You men, you beasts!" the prince projected. "Rebellious subjects, enemies to the peace! On pain of torture, from those bloody hands, throw your illtempered weapons to the ground!"

The prince waited. Each carrying a sword set it upon the ground, Tybalt making a point of setting his down the last.

"Now, hear the sentence of your moved prince. Three civil brawls, bred of nothing but airy words, have been summoned by thee, Old Capulet, and Old Montague, and have thrice disturbed the quiet of our streets." Within his mouth, the prince ran his tongue over his fangs. "If ever you disturb our streets again, your lives shall pay the forfeit of the peace. But for now, all of you, depart away."

Cautiously, with many an eye cocked at the musketeers, the citizens rose from off the ground and shuffled away, back to their goings on from before the foray.

Prince Escalus approached Lord Capulet and Lord Montague. "You, Capulet, shall go along with me," the prince commanded. "And Montague, come you this evening to discuss our future pleasure in this case. Once more, on pain of death, all men depart."

In their separate directions, the nobles and servants all turned and stepped away.

As Benvolio walked back towards the Montague manor, he found himself flanked by Lord Montague on one side and Lady Montague on the other.

"Who set this ancient quarrel anew?" Lord Montague asked. "Speak, nephew; were you near when it began?"

"Aye. The servants of your adversary, and the servants of yourself, were close to fighting when I did approach. I drew to part them. In that instant came the fiery Tybalt with his sword prepared, which he swung at me as he spoke of his scorn. We were interchanging thrusts and blows till the prince came, who parted either part."

"Was Romeo at this fray?" inquired Lady Montague.

"No, he was not here, Madam," Benvolio assured, to the lady's relief. "An hour before the worshipped sun peered forth in the golden window of the east, a troubled mind drove me to walk abroad, where—underneath the grove of sycamore that westward of the city grows—so early walking did I see your son. I made toward him, but he was aware of me, and stole into the cover of the woods. Being weary myself, I continued about pursuing my humor, not pursuing his, and gladly shunned he who gladly fled from me."

Lord Montague grumbled, and said, "Many a morning has he been seen there, with tears augmenting the fresh morning dew, adding to the clouds more clouds with his deep sighs. But as soon as the daylight comes, my son rushes to his chambers and locks himself up therein,

shutting up his windows and locking the fair daylight out, making himself an artificial night. Dark and damning must his foul mood prove—unless with good counsel may its foul cause be removed.”

“My noble uncle, do you know the cause of Romeo’s foul mood?”

“I neither know it nor can learn it from him. Could we but learn from whence his sorrows grow, we would as willingly give cure as know.” The three Montagues stepped past the manor gates.

“Merry, peace,” Benvolio said. “I will learn of his trouble.”

The lady took Benvolio’s hand and gave it a squeeze. “Thank you, nephew.”

Benvolio bowed his head in return. As the three neared the front door, it went swinging open, opened by a bloodied Abraham. Balthasar sat on the stairs behind, head hung near his knees, holding a wet cloth to his forehead. The lord and lady hurried past and disappeared into the manor. Abraham shut the door behind Benvolio, who lingered with the two.

“Why?” Benvolio asked. “I worried for you.”

Abraham went and sat on the stairs beside Balthasar. “Mark my word, we’ll not be the Capulets’ rug to be stepped on,” Abraham remarked.

Balthasar gave a small chuckle to himself. “No, stepped on as rugs, certainly not. Though we are quite rugged.”

“I trust you will mind one another’s wounds,” Benvolio implored.

“Aye,” said each of the two servants.

“See to that, then. And perhaps after, we may sit down all together, and if either of you have a better memory of last night than I, recount it for me to the minute.”

The three men smiled. Benvolio proceeded past Abraham and Balthasar, up the stairs, to check on the elusive Romeo, entombed so in his chambers. Up to the

third floor Benvolio marched, and then on Romeo's chamber door, he knocked.

Benvolio heard movement within. Then, the door swung open. Romeo stood in his green underpants and pink undershirt, a thick black blanket draped over the shoulders of his fair skinny frame. The curtains of Romeo's chamber were drawn shut, and no light was lit within. Benvolio smiled, pleased the knock had even been answered. "Good morning, cousin."

"Is the day so young?"

"But newly struck nine."

"Ay, me! Sad hours seem so long." There was a croak to Romeo's voice, though Benvolio could make neither heads nor tails of whether it was that of a slumbering man just awakened, or a tired man late to sleep.

"Come, sit with me by the window," Benvolio encouraged, and walked optimistically away from his cousin's endarkened catacomb.

Mercifully, Romeo followed. The two sat down in the cushioned chairs at the window, both facing the sunny day outside. Romeo's eyes screwed up into a squint at the sunlight.

"What sadness lengthens Romeo's hours?" Benvolio inquired.

Romeo huffed, and looked away.

"In love?" Benvolio teased.

"Out—"

"Of love?"

"Out of her favor, she who I am in love with."

Benvolio huffed.

Concern struck Romeo's face. "Good heart, what troubles you?"

"Thy good heart's oppression."

"Why, such is love's transgression. Woes of my own lie heavy in my soul, which grows only heavier with your sorrow piled on. Love is a smoke raised with fumes of sighs: if requited, a sparkling in lovers' eyes; but if vexed, a

sea nourished with lovers' tears." Romeo rose from his chair, shedding the blanket and leaving it there. "Farewell, my cousin."

"Soft! Where you go, I will go along. And if you leave me so, you do me wrong." Benvolio got himself up. "Tell me, who is it that you love?"

"Shall I weep and tell thee?"

"Weep! Why, no. But sadly as you like, tell me who."

"Bid a sick man in sadness pen his will—ah, word ill urged to one so ill. In sadness, cousin, I do love a woman."

"I had aimed so near, when I supposed you loved."

"A right good marksman! Alas, she is fair. Oh beautiful recluse, oh lustful chastity, oh frigid heat! From Cupid's loving bow, she lives unharmed. She will not mark the siege of loving terms, nor bide the encounter of assailing eyes, nor open her lap to saint-seducing gold. Oh, she is rich in beauty, only poor that when she dies, with beauty dies her store."

"She hath utterly sworn that she will live chaste?"

"She hath, and in that swearing makes huge waste. She hath forsworn to love, and in that vow I live dead."

"Bah. Forget her—"

"Oh, teach me how to forget!"

"*This* I can help you with! I am entirely certain of it," Benvolio said emphatically, and chuckled. "Give drink to thine lips, and freedom to thine eyes. Other fair beauties are abound in this fair city."

"You discredit her beauty and my sorrow both, though I take it you mean both well."

"Merry," Benvolio said, and clasped an arm around Romeo's shoulders, walking him towards the stairs, past return to his darkened cavern. "Take my heed tonight and you shall forget; I bet it, and if betting wrong, I'll die in your debt."

As Romeo's foot touched the top step, he froze in place, an unbudgeable stone to Benvolio's nudging. "Ay!" he exclaimed, and ducked under Benvolio's arm, back

towards his room. "Shall I meet these beauties you tell tale of in my pajamas?"

"You've the comeliness and witting charm to compensate," Benvolio assured. "But tis true: t'would be an easier job to get done if you dressed for it."

"Come then, I'll take but another moment."

Romeo stole back into his chambers, and Benvolio followed in after. Benvolio traversed the room, stepping around a landscape of dirty clothing and used dishware on the floor, and drew the shades a crescent open, to give his cousin some light to dress by. At his wardrobe, Romeo shed his undergarments and retrieved a pair of black leggings from a drawer. He paused with them in hand. "I must bathe first."

Benvolio made his way over, drew in a breath, and gave a dismissive wave. "You smell fine as a horse."

Romeo quirked his head. "I can honestly say, tis not a compliment I've heard before, if a compliment it was meant to be."

"I recall you once found a mare's scent to be perfectly befitting of a lover."

Romeo's face flushed red. "You tease the predilections of the younger Romeo. Alas, he's dead, and a newer, handsomer man stands here now. Twas a long time ago."

"Twas, twas. Though as I recall, it was more than just one time alone. To think you spurned by love now, when before you seduced a new lover—however many legs, however horse-haired or sheep-wooled—week to week, day to day, minute to minute, two at once—"

Romeo gave Benvolio a shove. Red from head to neck, he said, "Turn and let me dress. Alas, you exaggerate when you tease me so."

"If I do exaggerate tis only a little, and if I do tease tis well meaning. You made happy lovers of them all, as I recall it."

"I am dressed," Romeo announced. Benvolio turned, and saw his cousin dressed in black leggings, a black skirt,

a black longsleeved top which stopped short of the navel of his skinny stomach, and a black cloak—with grey stitchwork—which draped from about his shoulders to near the floor. He had also applied white makeup to move his face from fair to pale, accompanied with a pale pink shade of lipstick, and he had applied black eyeshadow, and he had dyed his hair black, and he had painted his trimmed fingernails black. He wore black boots with black socks to match.

“Tsk, Romeo, tis no way to go out! The women shall scarcely see you when night falls!”

“I am well dressed then, and will be saved for Rosaline yet.”

“Bah.”

“The darkness without compliments the darkness within, I find.”

“Bah again,” Benvolio said, and again draped an arm around his cousin’s shoulders, and began walking him out of the chambers. “Come, come. The day is but young, but there’s much for you ahead.”

ACT I.

SCENE II.

LADY Capulet sat upright upon a couch in the manor's eastern sitting room, hands in her lap, legs pressed together. A servant—she knew not his name—ran a feather duster along the shelf above the fireplace. Lady Capulet feared there would be no end to his dusting: the landscape paintings and the exotic wall-hung masks, the candlesticks and the chandelier, the colorfully stained goddess busts and the symbol-dense vases, to say nothing of how many dustable surfaces were evidently on the tables on which the busts and the vases stood. And somehow he seemed nowhere close to halfway done.

Lady Capulet steeled herself, reminding herself that she was his master, not the other way round. "I say."

The servant continued about his dusting.

Lady Capulet gripped the upholstery in a fist, and then let it go and smoothed it back before trying again. "I *say*, servant."

The servant's dusting hand paused, and then his head swung to face the lady. "Oh! Pardon, madam. I scarce remembered you were here. Still as a—"

"Would you fetch me a pitcher of water?"

The servant looked back to his dusting hand, which still hovered over the shelf above the fireplace, and the knickknacks thereon. Dejected, he pulled his hand away from the work. Facing the lady, and bowed himself. "Of course, madam. And a glass too I should assume?"

"Yes."

"Would you like ice as well?"

"Certainly."

"On second thought, I'm not sure we have any at the moment, though I could run and fetch—"

"No ice then."

"Well just but a moment ago you were certain—"

"Forget the ice. The water, please, with haste."

The servant, quite infuriatingly, mulled it over. Then he bowed himself again, sputtered another useless, "Of course, madam," and then went off, out of the sitting room to fetch the water.

Lady Capulet continued to sit still, waiting for the sound of his footsteps to be sufficiently departed. When she heard the sound of his footsteps beginning down the stairs, Lady Capulet arose, walked briskly to the bust of Athena, placed a thumb over each of the goddess's eyes, and firmly pressed them in. With a stony grating and then a mechanical *click!*, a secret hatch in the wall opened. Lady Capulet stooped into the short entrance, pulled the panel shut behind herself, and then stood upright in the tall, narrow passage between the walls.

With quiet footsteps the lady made her way through the in-between space, digging fingernails into the side of her neck, into her wrists, into her stomach, scratching, scratching, scratching. She proceeded to a narrow staircase and ascended it into a hidden room on the third floor—hidden because on the third floor itself, this room had no door, and was only accessible from the hidden stairway which the lady climbed. Though the room had no door, it did possess a stained glass window to the outside, depicting an owl perched in an olive tree. From the window, soft brown and green light shone dimly in, keeping the room from total darkness. At the center of the room stood a plinth. Atop the plinth was a stone bowl, centered in the window's light.

Lady Capulet went to the bowl. In times past, when the bowl had been overbrimmingly full, she had often stood a

moment and admired the objects within before taking one. They were the size and shape of toothpicks, but were made of strange grey materials infinitely more precious and potent than pinewood. A spitball to a musket round, a rock to a beating heart, a firefly to the sun—such was the contrast of a toothpick to one of Athena's Tears. The bowl was more than half empty.

On this day, the Lady Capulet did not stop to admire them before grabbing one—that damnable servant had kept her waiting far longer than she had deserved. Picking a rod from out of the bowl, the lady brought it under her nose and broke it in half. Snapped in twain, the rod fell away from being a solid and also fell away from the mortal laws of gravitation: as two globs of liquid, Athena's Tear fell upwards into each of Lady Capulet's nostrils, slipped through her sinuses in a way that still made the lady shudder violently, and then it was in her, working its strange and needed magic immediately. Where there had been worry, there was now resolve. Where there had been hands that wanted to tremble and skin that cried out to be itched, there was now a skilled, calm, obedient strength.

It would last an hour at most, and then she would be shaking and itching worse than if she hadn't sought the comfort of these relics today to begin with, but in this hour was a needed reprieve.

The lady heard the laughter of her husband coming from the floor below. She descended back down the narrow stair, through a set of hidden passages, and arrived at a one-way mirror, showing her the receiving room, in which stood her husband and Paris, a young nobleman, kinsman to the prince.

"...But Montague is bound as well as I, in penalty alike," Lord Capulet was saying, "and tis not hard, I think, for men so old as we to keep the peace."

"There is honor living yet within you both," Paris said. Such a way those of his family had of smiling with their mouths pinched shut. "And a pity it is that your houses

have lived at odds for so long. But now, my lord, what say you to my proposal?"

"I say again what I have thrice repeated already: my girl is still naught but a lass, not fourteen of her kind's years yet passed. Let two more summers whither in their pride, 'fore we may think her ripe to be a bride."

"Younger than she are happy mothers made."

"And too soon spent are those so early made." The Lord Capulet dug his foot in, crossed his arms, lowered his bearded chin. "In the earth are buried all my hopes but she. But! Tis not as though this issue must sit idle in the meantime. Woo her, gentle Paris, earn place in her heart; my will to her consent is but a part."

"Merry, I will begin at this task at once," Paris assured with his thin smile.

"And no better timing could there be: this night, we hold our annual masquerade feast!"

"Annual? I've never heard mention of it. Is it so secret a masquerade?"

"Well." Lord Capulet glanced away, and rubbed the back of his neck. "Twas annual once, though for many years now forgotten. But tonight it is remembered! I have invited many a beloved guest to enter this door, and you, most welcome, makes my number more. I say, servant!"

From the hall, after a moment, walked in the servant from above, feather duster in his back pocket, glass and pitcher in his hands, uncertainty in his gate. "Yes, sir?"

Lord Capulet flourished a sheet of paper, and then held it forward to the servant. "Go, sir, trudge about through fair Verona; find those persons whose names are written here, and invite them to tonight's masquerade feast."

The servant set the glass and pitcher down on the floor, took the paper, and without an utterance, turned and exited the manor, walked out to the street, and looked down at the paper.

"Find those persons whose names are written here... oh dear, oh dear. It is written... blasts. I am sent to find those

persons whose names here are writ, though I'd wish such a task given to a soul literate. I must go to the learned."

The servant looked up and saw two gentlemen passing by.

"...wrapped ice in a cloth will be excellent for that," the pale and darkly-dressed gentleman was saying.

"For what, I pray thee?" asked the gentleman who was bearded and brown-clothed.

"For when I break your shins."

"Why, Romeo! Art thou mad?"

"Not mad, but locked up more than a madman is. Shut up in a prison without my food, whipped and tormented and—good day, good fellow," Romeo said, turning to face the servant who had begun following at their heels.

"Good fellow, good day," the servant echoed. "I pray sir, can you read?"

"Aye, I have read my own fortune many a times. Tis misery without fail. You will want a more positive diviner than I."

"Ah, well." The servant regathered his thoughts. "I pray, can you read any writing you see on a page?"

"Aye, if I know the letters and the language."

"Ah, well. Rest you merry!"

The servant turned to leave, but Romeo grasped him by the shoulder, and bid him come back. "Stay, fellow, I can read. Let's see, this page here? It reads: Signor Martino and his wife and daughters; County Anselme and his beauteous sisters; the lady widow of Vitruvio; Signor Placentio and his lovely nieces; Mercutio and his brother Valentine; mine uncle, his wife, and daughters; my fair niece Rosaline; Livia; Signor Valentio and his cousin Tybalt; Lucio and the lively Helena." Romeo handed back the paper. "A fair assembly. Where are they beckoned?"

"Up."

"Up where?"

"Up to supper at our house."

"Whose house?"

“Well, my master’s house technically, if you’re going to be sniffy about it.”

“Indeed, I should have begun there,” Romeo said, going along.

Without need for Romeo to twist it out of him any further, the servant answered, “My master is the great rich Capulet; and if you be not of the house of Montagues, I pray, come and lift a cup of wine. Rest you merry!”

“Good day, good fellow!” Benvolio wished, waving a hand high in farewell as the servant departed. Once the servant was gone, Benvolio rested his hand on Romeo’s shoulder. “At this same ancient feast of the Capulets will be the fair Rosaline whom thou so love. Yet also in attendance, Lord Capulet has invited the fairest maidens in all of Verona. Let us go there, and compare her beauty to the rest. You shall hardly notice her whom to you now seems the best.”

“I’ll come along with you,” Romeo said, and shrugged away from his cousin’s shoulder-resting hand. “But I assure you, I go for the promised wine, not the promised company.”

ACT I.

SCENE III.

LADY Capulet, having been about the house a while and now feeling Athena's Tears losing their effect, returned to the sitting room, which—when the servant wasn't in it—was quite a nice room, a quiet place, warm, secluded. She fell to the couch and reclined, and rubbed at her bicep, which felt to be losing strength by the second, leaving sore and itching muscles in their trail as they left. Lady Capulet stomped a foot on the cushioned couch, which muffled her writhing fit.

She would need something to hold and to fret over when it was all gone, lest she go mad and fret and tear at herself again.

"Angelica!" she cried. The Angelica who she summoned was once the wet nurse, when she and the lord of the house had had living daughters.

From elsewhere in the manor, the sound of hurried footsteps began. A moment later, Angelica arrived beside the couch, where Lady Capulet now sat upright, proper. "You called, my lady?" Angelica asked.

Lady Capulet found it difficult to look Angelica in the eyes when speaking to her, as the former nurse bared a great many distracting features. First there was a sleeve of red rose tattoos covering the length of each arm, with a rather realistic rendering of a snake winding over the roses on the right arm. If the lady's eyes weren't caught by the snake, then they would nearly always catch on the former

nurse's mouth—in particular the old woman's teeth, or general lack thereof.

“Angelica, where's my Juliet? Call her forth to me.”

“Call her! Why, I scant seconds ago bid her stay put while I attended thee, and she'd had none of it, so the issue was needs be forced, and she's blockaded in the chambers wherein she shant be able to come no matter how loudly called. But another scant few seconds though, and I will go fetch her.” Angelica departed back out of the sitting room, back to the room from whence she'd come, calling, “Juliet! Juliet! The lady bids you come!”

From the room, Angelica heard scratching at the door.

Angelica opened the door, and out bounded a beautiful hound. Juliet sniffed the air in the hall, and looked to Angelica for a sign of which way they were heading. Standing, the Great Dane's back was level with Angelica's hips, and the top of the hound's head was level with the former nurse's breasts.

Angelica began back down the hall towards the sitting room, and Juliet bounded ahead, meeting Lady Capulet on the couch, sniffing thoroughly at the lady's offered hand, and giving it a lick or two in addition.

Lady Capulet allowed the dog to lick as she waited for Angelica to catch up. When Juliet was finished with the hand, the lady patted the couch beside herself, and Juliet hopped up, turned about a few times, and laid down beside the woman of the house. Lady Capulet began petting the hound, though more picked at the hound, raked, bothered. Athena's Tears were gone from her completely now, and the sobriety was wracking.

Angelica arrived again at the room. “Need you anything more, my lady?”

“Yes. There's a matter which concerns me, and this is the matter—no, in fact, go Angelica, tis between Juliet and I. No! Angelica, return. I have remembered myself. You should hear our council. You would know my girl is of a pretty age.”

"Faith, I can tell her age to the hour."

"She's but one full year old, soon to turn two."

"Aye. I'll bet fourteen of my teeth—though, let it be known, I have but four—that she's not fourteen in dog years, and just shy of two years old as men are concerned. Born the same day as my own daughter, she was. Susan would be near two now, and so in faith, I say Juliet is thirteen of her kind. Just coming into her second heat, I mark. God mark thee though, regal and grand Juliet: in the time since I've tended the children of men, you're the most beautiful creature I've tended to yet. And I might live to see thee carry on thy lonely breed some day, if I have my wish."

"Merry, that breeding is the very theme I came to talk of. Tell me, my dear Juliet, how stands your disposition to be bred?"

Juliet lifted a hindpaw to her mouth, and began chewing at a claw.

"You think so highly of it, I see," Lady Capulet bemoaned. She took Juliet's paw and moved it back to where it had been, stopping the hound from ruining her nails.

"A terrible shame it would be, should her breed end with her," Angelica offered. "Hound of the Danes, bred to be great and greater yet by your good husband Capulet; but alas, her brothers and sisters, cousins, aunts and uncles, mother and father and all, passed with no more pups borne, and now, just her is left."

"Though not yet two, mothers to pups are younger made," Lady Capulet mentioned, echoing what she had heard County Paris say earlier. She began scratching with a heavy hand along Juliet's scruff. "The valiant Paris is a competent breeder. Though there's none left to keep your line pure, perhaps with his touch some echo could endure. And you yourself would not be the lesser for it."

"Nay, more!" Angelica added. "The bitch grows bigger by the stud."

In agreement with Angelica, Lady Capulet rubbed deeper at Juliet's scruff. "Speak briefly: can you take to Paris's interest?"

Juliet inched in closer with the lady on the couch and rested her slobbery chin on the lady's leg.

From the entrance of the chamber, there came a pointed cough. Lady Capulet, Angelica, and Juliet turned to see the servant standing at the sitting room's entrance. "Madam, the guests have arrived," he said, in his slow-witted way. "Supper is served up, and the lord bid me fetch you, if you would follow me."

Lady Capulet gave Juliet's scruff a final rub, and answered, "We follow thee. Come Juliet, come Angelica."

ACT I.

SCENE IV.

BENVOLIO and Romeo, jaunty and trudging respectively, walked through a corner of Verona where the cobbled streets were missing half their stones and the rest were uneven, where patchwork boards were the exterior décor of the houses, where the smell of sewage was rank and unmissable in the air. They approached a house from which sounded drumbeats and a great many merry shouting voices.

Coming up to the doorstep, Benvolio knocked, and Romeo stood beside.

The door was yanked open from within—yanked open so forcefully that the figure who'd opened it stumbled back and fell to their buttocks on the floor. Far from injured in the body or in the ego, Mercutio laughed and rolled on the floor a moment, their mouth wide open in a smile, showing for the world to see that all of their top teeth, save the molars, were missing. It was said they had smashed the top row out themselves, deliberately. Twas around the same time they ceased living with Escalus, and moved to this dingier abode where presently they rolled on the floor. In the other room two men beat drums wildly together, while others stood around and had conversations at a shout to be heard.

Mercutio clumsily got up to their feet, then was struck with another laughing fit, and staggered and nearly fell again, but was caught by Benvolio, he and his cousin having entered.

Suspended in Benvolio's arms, Mercutio relaxed. With a smile they turned their head up to kiss their bearded rescuer. Benvolio lowered his head and kissed the slumly royal who had likely not spent a continuous waking hour sober for the last year. Standing on their feet properly this time, Mercutio leaned in to kiss Romeo as well, but the dark-dressed man leaned back. Mercutio leaned ever forward, eyes closed and lips puckered, then began laughing at themselves as they yet still tried for Romeo's affection.

Romeo drew his sword halfway from its scabbard, not to make use of the blade, but to jab Mercutio in the sternum with the pommel.

Mercutio shrieked and leapt back, no longer keen on a kiss from this attacker.

Romeo dropped the blade back into its resting place. Twas Benvolio's council that lead Romeo to carry his sabre about. Since the scuffle that morning, Benvolio would much like to see Romeo protected, and twas no better protector for Romeo than Romeo, for a mighty skilled fencer Romeo was.

"Dear friend, why do you injure me so?" Mercutio asked, sidling up against Benvolio. Benvolio wrapped an arm around them, keeping them steady upright. "Tis known you seek love, yet when love comes offered enthusiastically, you smite me back as though my lips were poisoned. It should be no wonder you are not loved, if lovers this way you treat."

"I fancy women, dear friend," Romeo said, far from the first time he had said as much to his present company.

"Tut, you know I am no man."

"Tis true, but nonetheless, you are not a woman either."

"I am neither and both, and will obey no rule forbearing me any privilege."

"Hence the pommel."

"You strike cruel and thoughtless," Mercutio chided, and rolled away from Benvolio. From a step on the nearby

staircase, Mercutio took a cup and drank from it, looked down into it, drank the rest of it, and then set it back.

"We came wondering if you might like to accompany us to the Capulets' masquerade feast," Benvolio divulged.

"No. I would sooner—"

"There will be wine."

"Yes! Onward! Guests, gather torches! Make them of a bedpost and my lantern oil, if it suits you! To the Capulet manor we go!"

The two drummers exited and lead the march, drumming as they made their way. Benvolio and Romeo walked beside each other in the midst of the troupe, and Mercutio danced about with a torch.

"It truly will light itself on fire," Benvolio noted.

"Deliberately, or?"

"That much, I know not."

"I say, Mercutio!" Romeo called, flagging the fire-dancing royal.

"What confession of realized love here beckons?" Mercutio asked, skipping over. Arrived, they walked in a dancing cadence beside Romeo.

"Give me the torch," Romeo requested. "My soul being heavy, I will bear the light."

"Nay. Come, lift your feet from the ground as you go! A dance! A skip! Even a solemn march would seem merrier than your foot-scraping."

"You shant see me dance, believe me. You have dancing shoes with nimble soles; I have a soul of lead, which stakes me to the ground such that I cannot move."

"You are a lover." Mercutio twirled the torch in a couple of idle circles. "Borrow Cupid's wings and soar with them."

"I am too sore enpierced with his arrow to soar with his light wings."

"If love be so rough with you, be rough with love. Prick love for pricking, beat love down—Is that the Capulet manor ahead?"

"Tis."

"If you've spoke true that this is a masquerade, I should hope you've brought me a case to put my visage in."

From his pockets, Benvolio began producing several black masks, made to cover the top half of the face and leave the mouth and jaw free for speaking and feasting. He put one on himself, and distributed the rest to all of the troupe, firstly to his cousin and secondly to Mercutio, who dawned the masks as well.

"Ah ha!" Mercutio remarked as they pulled shut the knot on the fastening string behind their head. "A face atop a face! What have I to cover, anyways? What care I if the curious eye notes deformities? If my hideous eyebrows cause terror, then I still am who I am, eyebrows and all that come with them. But come, let us hurry to the manor: we burn daylight."

Romeo quirked his head. "Nay, that's not so." He looked up and beheld the pitch and starry nighttime sky.

"I mean, *sir*, that in our trudging delay we waste our torchlights in vain, like lamps by day. Take our good meaning, for I've five wits to your one. If ever you think, mistakenly, that my wits have erred, know that my utterance was said with the employ of a wit beyond your skill to judge."

"We mean no offense," Romeo said. "Though since you speak of wit, I must tell you, I feel it is unwise to attend this masquerade."

"Why, may one ask?"

"I dreamt a dream last night."

"And so did I."

"Well, what was yours?"

"That dreamers often lie," Mercutio said, the end of their torch waving in a figure eight.

"Lie in bed where they sleep, dreaming things that are true."

"Oh, then I see Queen Mab hath been with you. She is the fairies' midwife, and she comes in shape no bigger than an agate-stone on the fore-finger of an alderman, drawn

with a team of little atomies athwart men's noses as they lie asleep. Her wagon-spokes made of long spinners' legs; the cover, the wings of a grasshopper; the traces, of the smallest spider's web; the collars, of the moonshine's watery beams; her whip, of cricket's bone; the lash, of film; her wagoner, a small grey-coated gnat, not half so big as a round little worm, prickt from the lazy finger of a maid; her chariot is an empty hazel nut, made by the joiner squirrel or the old grub, time out o' mind the fairies' coachmakers. And in this state she gallops night by night through lovers' brains, and then they dream of love; o'er courtiers' knees, that dream on court'sies, o'er lawyers' fingers, who straight dream on fees; o'er ladies' lips, who straight on kisses dream—which oft the angry Mab with blisters plagues, because their breaths with sweetmeats tainted are; sometimes she gallops o'er a courtier's nose, and then dreams he of smelling out a suit; and sometimes comes she with a tithe-pig's tail tickling a parson's nose as he lies asleep, then dreams he of another benefice; sometimes she driveth o'er a soldier's neck, and then dreams he of cutting foreign throats, of breaches, ambuscadoes, Spanish blades, of healths five-fathom deep, and then anon drums in his ear, at which he starts, and wakes, and, being thus frightened, swears a prayer or two, and sleeps again. This is that very Mab that plats the manes of horses in the night, and bakes elf-locks in foul sluttish hairs, which once untangled, much misfortune bodes; this is the hag, when maids lie on their backs, that presses them, and learns them first to bear, making them women of good carriage; this is she—”

“Peace, peace, Mercutio, peace!” Romeo pleaded, having endured as much as he could. “You talk of nothing.”

“True: I talk of dreams. Dreams which are the children of an idle brain, begot of nothing but vain fantasy, thin of substance as the air, and more inconstant than the wind, who woos even now the frozen bosom of the north, and,

being angered, puffs away from thence, turning his face to the dew-dropping south.”

Benvolio interjected, “This wind you both expel blows us off our course. Come, we’ve nearly arrived. I smell that supper is done, and if we dally any further, we shall come too late.”

“Too early, I fear,” Romeo countered. He still recalled his dream from the night before: “My mind misgives some consequence, yet hanging in the stars, shall bitterly begin his fearful course with this night’s revels, and expire the term of a despised life, closed in my breast, by some vile forfeit of untimely death. Alas. Benvolio, ye that hath steerage of my course tonight, direct my sail.”

Benvolio gave a rousing shout: “On, lusty gentlemen! Strike, drum!”

ACT I.

SCENE V.

HAPPY music played in three-four time, and serving men moved about the hall, providing food and drink from off their held trays. The old Lord Capulet glided drunkenly and merrily about among his masked guests, shouting good cheer to all those near to him and far from him. Seeing a troupe led by two drummers arrive at the other side of the receiving hall, he shouted as he approached, "Welcome, gentlemen! Ladies that have their toes unplagued by corns will have a dance with you!"

Benvolio leaned to Romeo, and mentioned, "We should have brought Abraham."

"What?"

"Nothing, nothing."

"Ah ha, my mistresses!" the Lord Capulet went on, "which of you all will deny these gentlemen a waltz? She that won't dance, by my rule already declared, I'll swear she hath corns!" Lord Capulet arrived at the newcome troupe, and shook Mercutio's hand in both of his. Mercutio returned the enthusiasm, adding their other hand to the shaking, making four in all. "Ha ha!" Lord Capulet went on, "Welcome, welcome, welcome gentlemen! Drummers, go to my musicians, tell them they shall have your accompaniment. Girls, dance!" Lord Capulet turned from the troupe and returned to the general hum of guests, shouting over them, "More light, servants! Let us see the beautiful chins of these enmasked guests! Ha ha! And quench the fire, the room is grown too hot!"

Spotting his cousin—all were quite recognizable, even in their masks—Lord Capulet made his way over. The two of them sat down at a bench in a corner of the hall, Lord Capulet catching his breath.

Lord Capulet asked his cousin, “How long has it been since you and I were in masks?”

“By our lady, thirty years,” responded the cousin.

“What! Tis not so long ago, no, surely tis not so long ago. Tis since the marriage of Lucentio. Twas just after the birth of his firstborn son, some five-and-twenty years ago, that we last held this masquerade.”

“Tis more, tis more. His son is elder, sir: his son is thirty.”

Across the grand hall, Romeo stood alone with a cup of wine in hand, Mercutio having skipped away taking Benvolio in tow. Alone, Romeo milled about the crowded hall, searching out Rosaline, his beloved. As he searched, though, he humored Benvolio’s purpose for the visit—to spy out other beauties, and see if any caught his eye. They were all dirt in his sight, piles of refuse and dung in dresses. All the beauties of Verona, Benvolio had promised. If that was so, then Verona was in a bad way.

Rosaline was nowhere among this crowd in the great hall. The Capulet manor was quite grander than a single hall, however, and the festivities had overflowed into other, cozier rooms. Romeo finished his cup of wine, stopped a servant to grab a second, drank all of it in one backwards tilt of his head, and grabbed a third cup to continue about with.

He wandered about each passage and sitting room on the first floor, sometimes hovering to listen in on some conversation, then continuing about when it seemed his presence was bothersome. Certainly Rosaline had been invited, as he had read the page inviting her, though perhaps the message hadn’t finished its transit to her, or else, perhaps this gathering was beneath her.

Romeo arrived at the final chamber on the first floor: another hall, cozier than the great hall, but a hall no less, in fact somewhat large given its secluded placement. Some few hung about, the din of conversation softer here. In the center of the room there was a fountain and a small garden, with a glass roof above to let in the light, when it was daytime. The trickling of water was the ambience, rather than the humming of strings and the beating of drums.

Wandering into the room, Romeo spied, in the back corner, a creature more beautiful than he had seen in years.

He tapped the shoulder of a servant, who was dusting at a bust of Ares. Of him he inquired, "Who is that lady, who doth sit beside yonder gentleman?"

The servant—the same who had borne the letter of invitation, Romeo realized—turned to Romeo, then turned to where Romeo was facing, then answered, "She was the wet nurse, when she began here."

"I should doubt—oh, no, sir, the other lady. Not the lady with the rose tattoos. She who sits on the floor, between the lady with the tattoos and the gentleman with the thin smile."

"Oh. I know not sir."

In another corner of the secluded hall, the Lord Capulet, who had ambled in, sat down on a bench beside his nephew Tybalt. "How fare you tonight, good sir?" the Lord Capulet asked.

"I fare foul since a moment ago, when this man entered," Tybalt said, nodding towards Romeo. "By his voice, he is a Montague. What, dares the slovenly urchin come here to scorn our feast, thinking a mask shall hide his rank odor? Now, by the stock and honor of my kin, to strike him dead I hold it not a sin."

"Be calm, gentle kinsman. Why storm you so?"

"Uncle, this is a Montague, our foe. A villain, that is hither come in spite, to scorn at our solemnity this night."

"Young Romeo, is it?"

"Tis he, that villain Romeo."

"Be calm, gentle nephew. Leave him alone. Though dressed in a solemn skirt, he stands like a merry gentleman. And, to say the truth, Verona brags of him. He is a well-mannered youth. Deadly with a sword, though one would never know it, and twice as good with a horse—better with the latter than many are comfortable speaking of, in polite company." The Lord Capulet hummed a chuckle to himself at that. Craning his neck to see past the fountain, Lord Capulet asked, "Who does he look at with those smitten eyes of his?"

Tybalt stood, looked over the fountain, and sat back down. "The hound."

"Ha! How looks the hound, and Paris?"

Tybalt once again stood and sat. "Bored. They are both bored."

"Well, there's no sense in allowing that. Go, seek company you find more suitable in the great hall, or in any other place, but not here. I shall go and find an excuse for Romeo and my girl to mingle."

"Uncle!"

"He is an upstanding young man, as I've already told you. A better judge of her disposition than even I. She needs be bred someday, lest her breed should with her die. If any shall open her, I wit it should be him. If she be not ready he would not proceed, and if she is ready indeed, he would proceed with her well, and leave a good impression of the act."

"I care not. He is a villain who craftily makes himself a guest here. I will not endure him."

"He'll be endured or you shall go. I'll not have a mutiny among my guests."

Tybalt stood, hand resting on his sword, staring at Romeo, who had come to sit by himself on a bench near the servant, who dusted behind the ear of the bust of Ares. Tybalt's hand flexed on his hilt once, twice, and then he

begrudgingly let it go. "I will withdraw. But his intrusion, now seeming sweet, will turn to bitter gall." He turned and marched out of the secluded hall.

With drunkenly jaunty footsteps, Lord Capulet tiptoed merrily across the room. "Angelica, Paris! Oh, and of course Juliet." He crouched and took Juliet's head in his hands, then rubbed at her back. Standing again, he said, "I've someone for you both to meet. She waits on the second floor, I will lead the way. Oh! Terribly frightened of dogs, I'm afraid. Juliet shall have to stay."

Angelica began, "I can stay with Juliet while—"

"Nay, perish the thought, this guest I bring you to shant be spurned. Juliet may stay here. A well behaved creature, she is, and pleasant company she'll make to any pleasant company around her. In such a pleasant room as this, I worry not."

Angelica gave a look to Juliet. Then to Lord Capulet, she said, "Aye. As you wish, my lord."

Angelica and Paris arose and followed after Lord Capulet, who feigned never to notice the young Montague man in the other corner, never once casting a curious eye in that direction, never once intoning any motive ulterior to bringing Angelica and Paris to a guest who, once arrived at the second floor, would be decided.

Juliet rose to follow Lord Capulet and his company.

"Stay here, Juliet," Angelica bid, turning back to face her.

She considered it, and then reluctantly, sat back down. After another moment, she laid down on the floor before the bench on which Angelica and Paris had sat.

Angelica turned, and followed Lord Capulet away.

Romeo, the moment Angelica and Paris had left his eyesight, arose from his bench, and swiftly made his way across the calm secluded hall, over to the hound, whose name he had overheard.

Romeo offered out his hand to Juliet.

Juliet lifted her head up, and stretched herself forward to sniff his hand. Her tail gave a couple of small wags, and she licked his hand once.

Beside Juliet, Romeo sat himself on the floor, leaning back, elbows resting up on the bench seat. He then began to pet her, gently. Juliet laid her chin on her paws, contentedly.

In a few minutes' time, Juliet was laid on her side, and Romeo on his side behind her, stroking her as they laid together. As they laid in one another's cozy warmth, Romeo eventually spoke, "If I profane, with my unworthiest hand, this holy shrine, the gentle fine is this: my lips, two blushing pilgrims, ready stand, to smooth that rough touch with a gentle kiss."

Romeo got up, continuing to have a gentle hand on her as he did, and moved from laying at her back to laying at her front. Lying so, face to face, hand on her strong and houndly shoulder, Romeo moved in and kissed Juliet on the front of her canine lips.

Juliet's tail thumped against the ground. She thought a second, and then moved in unto Romeo in turn, lapping at his face. He gladly indulged her as she left slobbering licks on his closed eyes and his forehead, and when she moved to licking at his mouth, he returned the kisses, the two of them at once as practiced as longstanding lovers and as newly met as strangers; they both were naturals, befitting of their natural love.

Romeo leaned back away from her kisses, only to ask her, "Would you come with me to a more private chamber?"

Juliet's tail thumped at the ground enthusiastically.

Romeo got up, and Juliet got up with him. He led the way, she eagerly following beside him. Catching that others in the secluded hall gave him disapproving looks, Romeo could only snicker at their poor understanding of the love which had unfolded before their very eyes. He scampered away from the secluded chamber and up a set

of stairs, which Juliet scampered up with him alongside. Together, they stole away into an unoccupied bedchamber. Inside, after bolting the door, Romeo drew the curtains open to allow the faint nighttime light inside. The night that followed was Juliet's first two times, and Romeo's first two times in quite a while. Through the darkest hours of the night, Juliet slept, while Romeo laid awake elated, nose buried in her coat, enmeshed with her seductive animal scent. As the two laid entwined on the cozy bed and the sunlight shone in through the open window, Romeo recalled his whereabouts, and the family unfriendly to his own which dwelt here.

By the new morning light, he got himself dressed, pulling on his leggings, fitting on his skirt, fastening his cape. When he was all dressed, Juliet petitioned him for one more go, which he with every gladness granted. Afterwards, he knelt beside the bed on which Juliet laid contented. "With sorrow, I leave thee," Romeo said, and gave her a kiss atop her head. "Faith, I shall return."

With his mask dawned, Romeo made a quick exit of the bedchambers, leaving the door open.

Juliet, in the mood for more sleep, nestled back down into the blankets and pillows, on all of which was the scent of herself and of he who had accompanied her throughout the exhilarating night. Within the cozy warmth of these sheets, she fell quickly into sleep.

When she awoke, she found that Angelica was knelt before her, hand on her shoulder, looking curiously at her.

"God deign ye a good morning, Juliet," Angelica said.

Juliet wagged, and then stretched, arching her back and lengthening out her paws.

Angelica hovered, knelt at the bedside. "Dear Juliet, I smell a scent on your breath that I scarce believe." Angelica moved in, and sniffed at Juliet's mouth more closely. With due care paid, Angelica laid a hand on Juliet's rump, and inserted a finger into the hound's sex. She hooked the finger slightly and withdrew it, drawing

out traces of a viscous slime. "Tis seed," she remarked. Angelica gave her finger a thorough smell, and then inserted the digit into her mouth, and pondered the taste. "Tis human," she added. "Fie! Tis that Montague lad, I bet my breast on it!"

Juliet adjusted to lie upright, and laid her ears back at Angelica's outburst.

Seeing this, Angelica sighed, and ran an assuring hand—her clean hand—down Juliet's back. "The festivities of the night before are done, dear girl. Get ye your rest. Worry not, worry not. I'll sit with ye as you sleep."

II

ACT TWO
CONTAINING FIVE SCENES

*Lo, here the lucky lot that seld true lovers find,
Each takes away the other's heart, and leaves the own behind.
A happy life is love, if God grant from above,
That heart with heart by even weight do make exchange of
love.*

ACT II.

SCENE I.

SEVEN days passed since the Capulets' masquerade feast. Prince Escalus walked beside the king through the passageways of his castle, their footsteps dampened by the grey carpet underfoot. As he had promised to do, the king led them into his scrying chamber. Twas a place Prince Escalus had only been a handful of times, but where the king could get lost in for days, weeks, or longer. Twas a black and hexagonal room. Black felt lined the six walls, the ceiling, the floor, and the back of the door through which the prince and the king entered, and the door's door handle. At the center of the room was a plinth covered with black felt on which the Scrying Glass of Abel's Blood was rested. Before the plinth was a small cubic black felt lined seat. The king also carried in his hands a wooden stool for his son. The prince closed the door behind them. By the red light of the orb, Prince Escalus went and sat down on the offered stool, beside his father, and into the glass they looked.

The red fog parted, and within the glass, there was shown a scene from a week ago. The Montague lad, Romeo, adorned with a skirt and a mask, laid on the floor of a hall in the Capulet manor, stroking the Capulets' sole remaining Great Dane hound, Juliet. The two seemed quite peaceful. After a time, the two kissed, which garnered a few disapproving looks, and then they stole away from the hall and into a bedchambers, the orb's sight following them all the while. What ensued, Prince Escalus

had half a mind to look away from, but also half a mind to take notes on: the young man's technique was extraordinary, exquisite, even if its target strangely chosen.

Prince Escalus gave a small breath of a faux laugh out through his nose. "Tis as rumor said, then."

"Aye, that it is, that it is," the king said in a quiet voice. He had somewhat nearly lost his voice entirely, from a lifetime of loud speech. "Now old desire doth in his death-bed lie, and young affection gapes to be his heir; she fair, for which love groaned for, and would die, with tender Juliet matched, is now not fair. Now Romeo is beloved, and loves again, alike bewitched by the charm of looks; but to his foe supposed he must complain, and she steal love's sweet bait from fearful hooks. Being held a foe, he may not have access to breathe such vows as lovers use to swear; and she as much in love, her means much less to meet her new-beloved anywhere. But passion lends them power, time means, to meet, tempering extremities with extreme sweet."

"Is this what you've summoned me all this way to show me, father?"

The king leaned back on his seat, and crossed his arms low over his stomach, looking idly at the orb as the red fog returned. "More or less, more or less," he quietly answered. "Humph. I know my motivations: that lord Capulet has bred a fine breed, and I should see it continued, as I'd like some for the castle. Yet even if I felt some other way, it is a certainty my same actions would come to pass, for already I have seen my actions, and their consequences, and the consequences of those unto decades, all interbalanced, impossible to change one thing lest the whole world tumble down. Before there was ever motivation for it, I have seen the hounds wandering about this castle in the background of other scenes. For decades I have known they will be here, and now I have arrived at the reason why, flimsy as a reason feels with the outcome

already fated. My son, you will want no use of this orb. I know nothing of what happens after my own death: that, it will not show me. But when I am dead, I beg you destroy it, or at the least hide it away from yourself. With the future known, it seems I am but an actor these days."

Prince Escalus bowed his head solemnly. He was unsure of how to respond, other than to assure the king, "I will follow your command to the letter, father. Perhaps it does not show you further because once you have passed, I have destroyed the orb so swiftly afterwards, and it has no tether to anything beyond then."

"Aye," the king said, and smiled a smile that overcame him more genuinely than any smile had in quite a long time. "Aye, I had never considered it that way, and perhaps you are right. Now, the matter of the hounds."

"I was about to ask. What have you seen pertaining to this? Is she not the last of her breed?"

"Yes, the last in the world, presently. Nonetheless, I think she will be enough."

From a pocket, the king produced a vial. In this blackened room, the vial shone, if dimly, as another point of light. There were no contents inside, solid or liquid, and so the prince discerned that it was some gas inside which produced the faint blue glow.

"A vial of Loki's Breath," the king said. Seeing his son's startled expression, the king smiled, fangs and all. Prince Escalus, long fascinated with reading on pagan relics, already knew the possible implications of handling anything pertaining to the trickster god. The king asked his son, "Have you knowledge of Loki's Breath specifically?"

Prince Escalus nodded. "It will serve perfect for this occasion. Though, I must emphasize, I worry at what other unforeseen occasion it might give service to in conjuncture."

"Tis not unforeseen," the king said, his gaze returned to staring at the orb's red fog. "Indeed, a sad consequence is

to come of this, eventually, but it is not sad for us, and it cannot be changed, anyhow.”

“Be that as it may, I would ask you for more particulars on the matter.”

The king shook his head.

“Shall I deliver Romeo the vial then?” the prince asked.

“I think you shall,” the king said, and offered the vial over.

“You *know* I shall,” the prince muttered, and took the vial.

The king chuckled, and wished the prince a safe journey. When the prince stood and left, the king remained, looking down into the orb. The red fog parted. The king settled in. In real time, the orb showed the prince walking to the library, locating a book, flipping to the needed section, consulting some pages, and then returning the book to the shelf. Though nighttime had fallen, the prince went next to the stables, mounted his white steed, and made off back to Verona. The king had already seen before that his son would ride a long way into this night, stay at an inn along the way, and early in the morning arrive safely in Verona. The red fog swirled as the scene was changed away from the prince riding away from the castle. The king continued to look, to see whatever was shown to him next.

Twas back in Verona, in the present time, where night had come even earlier—the spherical nature of the planet was felt by the king quite viscerally when jumps like this were made. In the night-clad Verona, Benvolio and Mercutio walked slowly along a narrow road behind the Capulet manor’s backyard, heads swiveling to look all about them. They walked along a road that was sandwiched in by the Capulets’ orchard wall on one side and a hedge on the other, accented by trees on either side.

Benvolio called, “Romeo! My cousin Romeo!”

“He is wise: on my life, he has stolen home, back to bed.” Mercutio yawned.

They had been sober since the morning after the Capulets' masquerade feast. They had awakened with their breath smelling of vomit and their chin encrusted in vomit, which in and of itself was not an atypical awakening. Benvolio was also present when Mercutio had awoken, which also had happened a fair few times. This time, though, the place of awakening was not Mercutio's chambers nor Benvolio's, but a rustic bedchambers coated in dust on every surface but the bed. Mercutio reached around for a bottle, and, finding none at all, shot a concerned look to Benvolio.

"Where are we?" they asked.

"A stable house of the Montagues, quite some distance out of Verona. There is not a drop of alcohol in ten miles of here, and the horse we rode in on has returned home by himself."

Mercutio made to draw their sword, but found their scabbard empty. They reached forward and drew Benvolio's sword instead. They pressed the sword's handle into Benvolio's hand. "Kill me. I beg you, do it swift, however painful, so long as it's done."

The sword rattled, some symbols on its guard giving off a shining light.

Benvolio rattled similarly, and put his blade back in its scabbard.

After painful and difficult discussion, Mercutio had agreed to return to Verona under Benvolio's care, for at least a time. Presently, the two of them milled around and around the Capulet manor looking for Romeo, who had given them the slip just earlier.

"He is not gone to bed," Benvolio assured. "For a certainty, he's jumped this orchard wall again. Call him, good Mercutio."

"Nay, I'll conjure him as though he were a ghost: for as he would say it himself, 'The old Romeo you knew a week ago is dead,' just as the Romeo before that was borne of a dead Romeo, and so I should only assume that the Romeo

with us today shall be dead as a doornail in but a few minutes here." Mercutio turned to face the Capulets' orchard wall, cupped their hands to their mouth, and shouted, "Romeo! Buggerer! Madman! Passion! Lover! Appear thou in the likeness of a sigh! Speak but one rhyme, and I am satisfied! Cry but 'Ay me!' and pronounce but 'love' and 'dove!' I conjure thee by Rosaline's bright eyes, by her high forehead and her scarlet lip, by her fine foot, straight leg, and quivering thigh, and the lands that there adjacent lie! I conjure thee, appear before us!"

"If he hears you, you will anger him."

"Nothing I've said could do anything of the sort. Tis true and honest. As for his mistress's name, I conjure it only to conjure him."

"Come, he hath hid himself among these trees, to go consort by the cover of night. Blind is his love, befitting of the dark."

"If love be blind, love cannot hit the mark. Oh Romeo, that she were... oh, that she were a..." Mercutio shook their head. "Tis troubling, this sobriety. Too many thoughts come to me, and block each other's exit. I must stupefy myself to allow a steady ray of my brilliant wits out through the single passage from which my soul is corporeally bound to flowing."

"Let us retire to bed, then," Benvolio offered, wrapping an arm around his tired friend. "Tis good to rest, and tis in vain to seek him here that means not to be found."

Mercutio nestled into Benvolio for a moment, and then after a few deep, mindful breaths, the two made their exit, bound for Benvolio's bedchamber.

When all was quiet, Romeo emerged from the hedge in which he'd hid. He crossed the road, climbed the Capulets' orchard wall, and stole across the yard, arriving near to the manor, crouched behind a shrub. Above at a window, the room within unlit, the stately head of Juliet looked out from behind the glass.

“But soft, what light through yonder window breaks?” Romeo whispered to himself, enraptured. “It is the east, and Juliet is the sun. It is my lady. Oh, it is my love. She speaks even when not a word she utters: her eyes are discourses. Two of the fairest stars in all the heaven do entreat her eyes to twinkle in their spheres til they return. Her eyes in heaven would stream so bright that the birds would sing, and think it were not night. See how she rests her chin upon the sill! Oh, that I were a paint upon that sill, that I might touch that cheek!”

Juliet, lifting her head from resting on the sill, noticed the noise in the yard and gave a bark.

“Oh, speak again bright angel! For thou art as glorious to this night, being over my head, as is a winged messenger of Heaven unto the white-upturned wondering eyes of mortals that fall back to gaze on him when he bestrides the lazy-pacing clouds and sails upon the bosom of the air.”

Juliet left the window. A moment later, Romeo heard a scratching at the back door. Moving swiftly, he tiptoed up to the door and opened it. Juliet bounded out and leapt at Romeo, who met her embrace, held her, rubbed her, kissed her along the side, met those of her kisses that were aimed at his mouth and gladly received the rest of her kisses graciously, on his ear, on his neck, on his hands. Their initial greeting completed, Romeo strode away from the back door as swiftly as he'd come to it. Juliet followed closely. He led the way to a secluded garden, walled in with creeping vines growing along the upright meshes and on the mesh overhead, a room as living as the night without and the love within.

Romeo sat there on the grass in the room with Juliet, and the two of them kissed a long while. When she flagged him, still being in her heat, he quite happily met her demands. Afterwards as she licked at herself, Romeo sighed, lost in the beauty of this hound, her coat glinting in the moonlight. He whispered softly to her, “Oh Juliet, Juliet, why must you be Capulet? Deny thy owner, and

refuse thy name. Or, if thou will not, be but sworn by my love, and I'll no longer be a Montague. Tis thy name that is my enemy. Thou art thyself though, not a Capulet. What's a Capulet? It is not paw, nor claw, nor leg, nor face, nor any other part belonging to a dog." He sighed again. As she finished licking herself she began licking him, and when she was finished with that, they kissed a while more, and then laid together relaxed, him petting her, whispering to her yet again. "Oh, if you could be some other name. What's in a name? That which we call a rose by any other name would smell as sweet—and you would know about that far better than I." He said the last in a tone more playful to her, and she gave a wag, turning her head to look at him face to face. He scratched at her back. She arched her back and stretched as he went, and then rolled onto her back, showing her belly for him to rub. As he rubbed her belly in the soft moonlight, he went on, voice still a bit playful, and made more so by the repetitive punctuation caused by his rubbing. "So Juliet would, were she not Juliet called, retain that dear perfection which she owns without that title. Juliet, doff thy name, and for that name, which is no part of thee, take all of myself."

Juliet rolled off of her back towards Romeo, and assaulted his face with yet more slobbering kisses. Her youthful excitement made Romeo's heart flutter each time she went in unto him for this—her tongue, a more succinct poet than his could ever dream.

If Juliet wished for more words, then a codex a day he could recite to her. But in truth, the contents of his words were not the height of meaning. Not meaningless, but still, most syllables containing less meaning than each moan, most words containing less meaning than each kiss, most sentences containing less meaning than each nuzzle, most stanzas containing less meaning than each scratch on her lower back, most epics containing less meaning than each sniff. Indeed, the increase in words was the inverse of

meaning, while the increase in gesture stood meaning's corollary.

The two lovers heard the back door open, and both stopped their kissing to lift their heads to face in that direction.

"Juliet?" called Angelica, out into the yard. Somewhat louder, she called again, "Juliet?"

Juliet looked to Romeo.

"I will return," Romeo assured. "Nay, that is not strong enough: I vow, we will live together happily, and not have to go about under cover of night as though rogues. Tomorrow I shall arrange it. But for now, to Angelica go."

Juliet stood, and walked out of the garden at a trot to Angelica.

"Madam!" Angelica said, intoning relief entwined within her disapproval. "Out so late?"

With Juliet in, the door shut. Romeo waited a while, allowing any lingering suspicions to die down and their owners to fall asleep before he made his exit. When a yawn struck him, this struck him as a mark that it was time. He withdrew from the Capulets' yard, climbed over the orchard wall, and returned through the nighttime Verona streets to the manor of the Montagues. Therein he crawled into his bed, at once contented at the time he had gotten to spend with his beloved earlier on this night, yet saddened she was not here presently to share this lonely bed with him.

ACT II.

SCENE II.

ROMEO arose in the morning, bathed, and went to his wardrobe. He dressed in sky blue leggings and a blue floral tunic, the cloth belt about his waist studded as it were with large cloth replicas of deep blue sunflowers. He had a cup of tea in the back garden, listening to the happy birds. When he was finished with it, he went to the stables, checked in with each of the horses and wished them a good morning, and then mounted a bay stallion. Romeo encouraged him on at a walk. The two were headed out to see Friar Lawrence, in business pertaining to Romeo's promise to Juliet the night prior. Romeo and the stallion made their way out to the Verona streets.

There, on the street before the Montague manor, stood a white steed, large and gorgeous. Romeo urged the stallion to halt and looked admiringly at the tall mare in the path. Her physique was dense with elegant muscle, her snow white coat shone in the morning light, her frost-blond mane hanging as frame to her confident black eyes. After some moments, Romeo realized the rider atop her as well: the prince of scales, Prince Escalus. Romeo glanced here and there for the prince's guardsmen, his musketeers, his courtiers, but there appeared to be none. Romeo considered if he had misidentified the man. He was unsure if he had ever seen the prince about town unaccompanied before.

Prince Escalus gave his steed's sides a light spurring. As she came out of her standing and into a trot, he steered her

reigns towards Romeo. With their horses beside one another, Romeo and Escalus brought face to face, the prince halted his horse. Were either the sort, the two men could have leaned forward and hugged one another at this distance. Romeo's stallion suggested to him that they should move, but Romeo encouraged the stallion to stay.

"Good morning, handsome prince," Romeo wished.

"And a good morning to you in turn, good sir," the prince returned. "Though as to my handsomeness, I must admit, I don't believe your appraising eyes were cast squarely at me just now."

"Well." Romeo flushed just slightly, but did indulge his eyes in looking back down to the white mare, now able to see her beautiful face all the more closely. "What is her name?"

"Hel," the prince said, not a word of a lie.

"Oh, dear. A grand enough name, at least."

"Will you ride beside me a while, Romeo?" the prince asked. "My business is not urgent, I suppose. Important, but nothing needs be done this hour."

Romeo considered, and answered, "My business this morning is much the same, my prince. Yes, set the path and we will ride alongside."

The hoofsteps of the two horses clicked through the tittering sounds of the city waking up. Prince Escalus lead the way westwardly out of the city proper, into a sycamore grove, where the wind passed through the trees in steady waves. Escalus brought his mare to a stop on a secluded path, and Romeo bid his stallion to stop matched beside her. The four listened to the wind a while.

Wshhhhhh... Wshhhhhh... Wshhhhhh...

"I come to offer you a gift," the prince said.

"Oh? Forgive my prodding at the very notion, but what is the occasion?"

"Tis no secret you fancy beasts. The odd woman now and again, yes, but it is the four-legged that are most readily enwrapped in your romantic soul, and while there, given all the commodities that one would dare hope the most generous human love should afford."

Romeo glanced away, unable to help smiling. "I would call your tongue nothing of a liar at those words."

"Tis also no secret which beast has earned your affections recently."

Now fear-stricken, Romeo remained silent.

"The Capulets' Great Dane hound, Juliet. This is correct, yes? I should hope your love shall prove stronger than any notion of polite cowardice that would urge you to deny it."

"Yes. A second time, your words speak the truth. Her heart and mine beat as one. My business this morning was to the abbey, to arrange a marriage."

If the prince was surprised, he did not show a hint of it. "A wedding gift, then," he said, and reached into a pocket of his regal attire. With a gloved hand, he offered Romeo the vial, glowing faintly blue, though as much was not easily visible in the light of day. "I urge you, do not open it here. But do take it."

Romeo took the offered vial and examined it.

The prince gave Romeo its story. "The Norse say that their god Loki is father to three, and mother to one: all together, his children are Hel, Fenrir, Jörmungandr, and Sleipnir. Respectively, they are a woman, a wolf, a snake, and a horse. What I have given you today is a vial which holds bound inside of it one of the Norse god Loki's breaths. When next you go in unto Juliet, open this vial and take in its breath before you lay your seed inside of her. With this relic's help, the two of you may bear children, even though you are man and beast."

Astonished, Romeo held the vial with a new echelon of care, suddenly finding himself steward to a sacred blessing in wait.

With a thin smile, the prince added, "In truth, the relics of more deities than not will produce such an effect. But I hope that Loki's brand of it will be befitting of your lively soul and hers."

"Prior to this gift, you had not spoken a word of a lie yet," Romeo said, finding the words. "If yet again you speak the truth in telling me what this is, I cannot begin to imagine the repayment that I would owe to you."

The prince chuckled. "Tis a gift, truly, and as such it expects no repayment. Though I will confess that in convenient happenstance, the repayment is contained within the gift itself: your wit, charm, manners, looks, humor, skill, and allover wellrounded dashing demeanor are the pride of Verona; Juliet, handsome, strong, keen-nosed, swift-legged, and a hundred other features I'm sure you would know better than I, is the pride of the houndly race, and a good fruit of the Capulets' work that will be to waste should her breed end with her. And so, if it brings forth offspring to you and to her, for a household and for a pack, then for as much as this vial is a gift to you, it is twice as much a gift to Verona."

"Merry, now you do tell lie in your overzealous praising, and I may weep."

"I will leave you, then," Prince Escalus said, and gathered Hel's reigns. "God deign you a good day, and I wish you well on your business at the abbey."

Without awaiting a response, the prince spurred Hel forward, and she carried him away at a trot.

Romeo stowed the vial carefully within an inner breast pocket of his tunic. He did weep then, as he had done many a time in this sycamore grove. When the tears were done with him and he was able to wipe the last of them from his face, he leaned down and gave his stallion a few appreciative strokes, feeling a residual need to continue thanking anyone at all. He then encouraged the stallion on, and to the abbey they went, to see a mentor Romeo

had spurned for some months, since the worst of his tumult for the near-forgotten Rosaline.

As they arrived, Romeo inhaled the scent of the abbey deeply. It was a miraculous range of herbs that were coaxed to grow throughout the yard here. Indeed, the yard within the open-gated abbey walls was more shrub than grass, more row than path. From the threshold of the open gate, Romeo spied Friar Lawrence, the man he had come to see. The friar was stooped over with a basket, rubbing a short plant's leaf between his thumb and forefinger. Apparently deeming the leaf fitting—for what, Romeo did not know—the friar plucked the leaf off, put it in his basket, and continued on to the next plant to be examined.

Romeo dismounted. He hitched the stallion at the open gate with a knot that was made to come apart immediately if the stallion gave the slightest insistence. After taking a small moment to tell the horse of his appreciation, Romeo made his approach to the friar.

The friar was speaking merrily to himself—more, to the plants—as Romeo arrived. The young Montague man stood a while and listened.

“The grey-eyed morn smiles on the frowning night, checkering the eastern clouds with streaks of light; and flecked darkness like a drunkard reels from forth day's path and Titan's fiery wheels; now, ere the sun advance his burning eye, the day to cheer, and night's dank dew to dry, I must up-fill this osier-cage of ours with baleful weeds and precious-juiced flow'rs. The earth, that's nature's mother, is her tomb; what is her burying grave, that is her womb; and from her womb children of diverse kind, we sucking on her natural bosom find; many for many virtues excellent; none but for some, and yet all different. Oh, mickle is the powerful grace that lies in herbs, plants, stones, and their true qualities; for naught so vile that on the earth doth live, but to the earth some special good doth give; nor aught so good, but, strained from that fair use, revolts from true birth, stumbling on abuse; virtue itself

turns vice, being misapplied; and vice sometimes by action dignified. Within the infant rind of this small flower, poison hath residence, and medicine power; for this, being smelt, with that part cheers each part; being tasted, slays all senses with the heart. Two such opposed kings encamp them still: in man as well as herbs—grace and rude will; and where the worser is predominant, full soon the canker death eats up that plant.”

“Good morrow, father.”

“*Benedicite!*” the friar shouted, flinching and nearly dropping his basket. “What early tongue so sweet saluteth me?”

The friar looked up, and beheld the young Montague man. Seeing who came visiting, the friar could scant be anything but happy.

“The young prodigy returns,” the friar said warmly, “and he returns quite early in the morning, at that.”

“Tis not so early.”

“If that’s not so, then here I hit it right: our Romeo hath not been in bed last night.”

“Nay, nay, you miss. Faith, I went to bed last night. Beds, rather, the latter being my own.”

“God pardon sin! Wast thou with Rosaline?”

“With Rosaline?” Romeo echoed the question ponderously. He scarce understood what the friar was asking. It seemed such a strange thing to ask, now. “My ghostly father, no. I have forgotten that name, and that name’s woe.”

“That’s good, my son. But where hast thou been, then?”

“I have been feasting with my enemy. My heart’s dear love is set on the beautiful girl of rich Capulet.”

“Being he has none of his daughters left alive, I worry at what you mean by this. Speak plainly, son, and be forward in thy admittance; riddling confession finds but riddling forgiveness.”

“Then plainly: my love is for Juliet.”

“I know her not.”

"The Capulets' hound."

Friar Lawrence leaned back as he let out a sigh of relief both long and loud. Returning to his picking at the plants, he said, "Back to the critters, then."

"Not back to them, but finally arrived at one."

"I don't know if I understand your distinction."

"I mean only that I wish for you to combine this critter and myself in holy marriage."

Friar Lawrence stopped with the plants again, and once more wheeled to Romeo, exclaiming, "*Holy Saint Francis!* What a change is here! Is Rosaline, whom thou didst love so dear, so soon forsaken? Young men's love, then, lies not truly in their hearts, but in their eyes. *Jesu Maria*, what a deal of salty brine hath washed thy sycamore cheeks in the name of Rosaline! Look, here upon thy cheek, the stain doth sit of an old tear that is not washed off yet. If ever thy wast thyself, and these woes thine, thou and these woes were all for Rosaline. And art thou changed?"

Romeo's arms found their way to becoming crossed, and his stance shifted. "You often made fun of me for loving Rosaline."

"For doting, not for loving, pupil mine."

"You told me to bury love."

"Not in a grave! I wished only that you would put one down, and take another out to have."

"I have done just that," Romeo assured. "I pray thee, chide not: she whom I love now doth grace for grace and love for love allow. The other did not so."

Friar Lawrence muttered something, and then sighed. "Oh, Romeo. In truth, you stand more righteous on this matter than do we who seek out but human loves."

The friar had told this to Romeo many times in the past, to the point it seemed to Romeo that the friar spoke most of it from wrought, even though he seemed each time to speak as though divulging it for the first time.

"God made the land and the sea and the fish and the beasts," Friar Lawrence began. "He blessed the fish before

ever blessing mankind, if you would believe it from the way other sects speak as though humans are atop the natural world, and not a mere part of it, a servant to it if anything. Fie! When God made the human race, He made but one man, and no human else. And, deciding that it was not good that Man should be alone, God sought to find him a partner. Every animal that walked the land, He brought forth to the man. The man found none suitable, and so God created a woman. This scripture was written by the prophet Moses, who interprets this to be the reason why man and woman should be wed. Pah! Phoo! A powerful prophet indeed, but ultimately proven imperfect in the eyes of the Lord, and, I think, imperfect in his interpretation on the lesson here. For when else, pray tell, do Man and God disagree on what is good, and we are to take Man's side of it? God created, in a world yet untouched by sin, a perfect garden, in which one Man would tend it, and with each beast he would be matched until finding one that was suitable for him, and once having found a partner, being that beast's partner thereafter. Thus I do believe, dear Romeo, that you walk closer to God's vision of what Man was to be than anyone else whom I have ever known. *Certainly*, you have given a great many critters a fair try. And now, I speak true when I tell you how it warms my heart you have found yourself a partner you would like to stay with. Come, in this respect I'll thy assistant be. For this alliance may so happy prove, to turn your households' rancor into pure love."

Romeo's heart brimmed with joy at the friar's approval. "Oh, let me go hence and contrive to have her find her way here for the ceremony. I stand on sudden haste."

"Wisely, and slow; they stumble that run fast."

ACT II.

SCENE III.

BENVOLIO sat on the ledge of a square fountain in a Verona square, with Mercutio laying out on the ledge on their back, one knee up, head resting on Benvolio's lap. One of Mercutio's hands idly splashed and swished around in the water. One of Benvolio's hands idly toyed at Mercutio's hair.

"Why, where the devil can this Romeo be?" Mercutio wondered. "Was he not home last night?"

"He was, but not for long," Benvolio answered. "Though I never saw him, a horse from the stable was gone this morning."

"Ah, he rides to that pale-hearted wench, that Rosaline, who torments him so that he will surely run mad. That, of course, or he rides to a secluded place for him and the horse."

"I would doubt the latter," Benvolio said. "Firstly because the stable itself has served quite a fine place for him in the past, as I have witnessed—more than once and every time quite unintentionally—with mine own eyes. But also, twas a stallion missing, not a mare."

"Who should tell the difference, when they cannot speak to say what they believe themselves to be?"

Benvolio raked his fingers through the royal's hair lovingly without response for a bit. Eventually he answered, "You are not wrong—"

"Nor ever have I been—"

"Nonetheless, perhaps we all, you and I and Romeo alike, proscribe things to the four-legged that do not apply to them as they do to us."

"Aye. Romeo and I have talked about as much at length," Mercutio said. They then stretched, lengthening themselves out on the fountain ledge, nuzzling their head back into Benvolio's lap.

"On the subject of Romeo, I spoke with his father this morning at breakfast, as you remained in bed," Benvolio said.

"I maintain I made the wiser choice."

"In either case, some foreboding knowledge came of it."

"Oh, do go on."

"Tybalt, the kinsman to Old Capulet, hath sent a letter to the Montague house."

"A challenge, I bet my life on it."

Benvolio, twirling a lock of Mercutio's hair, said, "Indeed, twas that exact thing. If Romeo learns of it, he will not be able to help but answer it."

"Any man that can write may answer a letter."

"Nay, he will answer the letter's master, how he dares, being dared."

"Then alas, poor Romeo is already dead!" Mercutio proclaimed, and threw both arms into the air in a display of melodrama, before letting them fall limply back to where they were, one arm hanging off towards the ground, the other swishing about in the fountain's water.

"You were once as close as a brother—a sibling, a sibling—to Tybalt."

"Yes, the latter and the latter's latter I was. And in truth, at least at that time, perhaps the first is accurate enough as well."

"What do you make of Tybalt now?" Benvolio asked.

Mercutio answered, "As though he were a fourth child of the king, brother to the prince of scales and to the prince myself and to the lovely prince Valentine, he himself we called the prince of cats when we were closer, though he is

more than prince of cats, I can tell you. Oh, he is the courageous captain of compliments. He fights in the same way you sing a nursery rhyme: keeps time, distance, and proportion; rests one, two, and the third strike rests in your bosom. A butcher, a duelist; a duelist, a gentleman dressed more audaciously than any gentlelady in her modesty dare; fiend with the immortal passado, the punto reverso, the hay—”

“The what?”

“The pox of such antic,” Mercutio went on, perhaps in answer or perhaps ignoring the interruption entirely. “By Jesu, a very good blade!; a very tall man!; a very good whore! Why, is not...”

Mercutio stopped, noting that Benvolio had ceased listening and had craned his head to face elsewhere.

“Here comes Romeo,” Benvolio informed.

Mercutio sat upright beside Benvolio and looked in the same direction to behold the lover atop a stallion, who made his way into the square at a walk. From atop the stallion, Romeo looked this way and that, though his eyes passed over Benvolio and Mercutio entirely.

Mercutio, having none of that, raised a hand tall in the air towards the Montague, and shouted, “Signor Romeo!”

His attention drawn finally to the two at the fountain, Romeo gave some signal to the horse, and the horse began his way over.

“*Bon jour!*” Mercutio greeted as the young man arrived. “There’s a French salutation for your French slop. You gave us the counterfeit fairly last night.”

Romeo tilted his head. “Good morning to you both. What counterfeit did I give you?”

“The slip, sir, the slip,” Mercutio answered.

“Pardon, good Mercutio, but my business last night was great—”

“—Dane—”

“—was great, and my business today all the greater. Good day, good gentlepersons.”

Romeo produced a clicking sound from his mouth and made a slight change to his posture, and the stallion resumed his walk.

Atop the stallion, Romeo made his way down street after street. From atop his tall vantage, he searched out a woman with sleeves of rose tattoos. Twas likely she would be somewhere abouts the Capulet manor, which he rode the perimeter of back and back again, and again, and again.

As the morning gave way to noonday, he spotted the rose-tattooed woman walking back from the market, a parasol in her hands, and a large bag in each hand of the man who walked beside her. Angelica, spotting Romeo at the same time as he had spotted her, switch directions to walk straight for him.

“God deign ye good day, gentleman,” she said, arriving beside his steed, who he had encouraged to a halt. Her face remained in the shade of the parasol, though she tilted it up enough that she could regard him, and he her.

“And to you, gentlewoman,” Romeo wished in return.

“Gentleman, can you tell me where I may find the young Romeo?”

“Aye, I can tell you—but young Romeo will be older when you have found him than he was when you sought him; at this second, I am the youngest of that name.”

“If you be he, sir, I desire some confidence with you; step down from thy horse.”

In a flash Romeo was dismounted, his hand rested comfortingly on his stallion’s side. From this lower vantage, he was only a head taller than Angelica, more or less at eye level with the man accompanying her, and was all the more aware of the sword strapped to the man’s side, though the man’s hands remained clasped on the handles of the bags he held. Romeo nor the tattooed woman had to speak at a raised volume to speak with one another. Indeed, they could speak at something only faintly louder than a whisper.

Beholding Romeo, the woman took a shaky breath, and said, "Now, before God, I am so vexed that every part of me quivers. Ye scurvy knave Montague! Pray you, sir, a word, for I have waited to happen upon you for quite some days now. Through her wantings this week, staring out the back window for a visitor, flagging any who pass, wagging at thy very name, it is clear that the girl of my lady has bade me inquire you out. What she bids me say, you should know better than I, though I am sure I know enough of it. But first let me tell you, if you should lead her into a fool's paradise, as they say, it would be a very gross kind of behavior, as they say; for the gentlewoman is young; and therefor, if you should deal double with her, twould be a weak way to deal with any gentlewoman."

"My every intention is aimed at her benefit—her wellness, her joy, her fulfillment; I aspire to raise my decorum to meet this angel who has deigned to reach down to me," Romeo assured.

"Good heart, and, i'faith, I will tell her as much."

"If you do believe my intentions, and you do believe her love of me, I would ask that you devise some means to take her out on a walk this afternoon. And, bringing her to Friar Lawrence's cell, she shall be married."

Angelica nodded. "There is a nobleman in town, one Paris, that would have her to breed. I upset her sometimes, speaking to her and telling her that Paris is the proper man. She cares not for him. But when I speak to her of you, there is life in her. I would see her sent to you rather than him."

From a pocket of his tunic, Romeo produced a sack heavy with coins, and held it out to Angelica. "Here is for the trouble. And, though I reject the premise of my next words on many grounds, it would cover more than the reasonable price of a hound, even one as magnificent as her."

"No, truly sir, not a penny."

Romeo tossed her the sack. The man beside her dropped one of his bags and shot his arm out, catching the sack before it arrived at Angelica. He stowed the sack in the dropped bag before picking it back up.

"This afternoon, sir?" Angelica reiterated. "Well, she shall be there."

"Thank you. And for now, farewell, gentlewoman."

"God in Heaven bless thee, sir," Angelica wished.

In a flash, as fluid as though merely turning to face the other way, Romeo was atop his stallion once more, and rode off at a happy walk.

ACT II.

SCENE IV.

JULIET laid atop the back of a couch beside a window. Her head was faced looking out of the window to the front yard. Her man from the back yard came only at night; here, she awaited Angelica's return. The day was yet new when Angelica and Peter had went out, promising to return soon. Still Angelica was not back. Would that love's heralds were thoughts, which would ten times faster glide than the sun's beams, driving back shadows over louring hills; would that love were drawn by nimble-pinioned doves, as the wind-swift wings of Cupid, as swift in motion as a ball. The sun stood upon the height of its daily transit, and yet still, Juliet was home by herself—somewhat. The servants ignored her for the most part, would not play, would not listen to her in any capacity, as though they were deaf to her. The lord and the lady at least minded her, and Angelica certainly had ears to listen and care to give. Her newfound Romeo listened and loved more than she'd thought those of his humanly race were able.

The front gate of the manor's fence swung open. Juliet shot up and stood on the couch's back, tail thumping against the window's glass as she wagged. In through the gate came Angelica and Peter. Barking boisterous greetings all the way, Juliet leapt down off the couch and bounded out of the room, down a passageway, down the stairs, and arrived at the manor's front door.

When the door came open, Juliet leapt up on Angelica, standing to greet the woman.

Angelica smiled, though was out of breath. "Let me rest a moment, oh Juliet," she said, putting a hand on Juliet's chest and gently pushing her back, easing her back to having her forelegs placed on the ground.

Juliet pressed her side close against Angelica and looked at Peter. She wanted to smell into the bags he was carrying, but knew she should not. This man had struck her before, for nothing more than drawing too close. He had received an earful when Angelica had caught him once, and he had not struck her since, but he would again, if given the slightest reason and while not under Angelica's eyes.

Angelica, noticing Juliet's nervous looking, said, "Peter, go put away the produce."

Peter stepped forward into the manor towards the kitchen, leaving Juliet and Angelica alone.

Angelica moved at a slow limping shuffle to the nearest couch and fell back into it. "Fie, how my bones ache!" she proclaimed. "What a jaunt I have had!"

Juliet came over, rested her chin on a couch cushion beside Angelica, and looked up at her.

"I am a-weary, give me leave a while—"

Juliet groaned disapproval, a low vocalization shaped like the beginnings of a bark, made without raising her voice much.

"Jesu, what haste?" Angelica moaned. "Can you not stay a while? I've only just been back from my walk, and now you demand yours?"

From the word 'walk' forward, Juliet began to wag.

"Lord how my head aches! What a head have I! It beats as it would fall in twenty pieces!"

Juliet stepped back and barked at Angelica, still wagging.

"Oh beshrew your heart for sending me about, to catch my death with jaunting up and down." Angelica closed her eyes and rubbed her temples with her fingertips a moment. When the pounding of the headache subsided

just a little, she said, "I have finally spoken with your man Romeo. If you will come, at Friar Lawrence's cell there stays a husband to make you a wife."

Angelica began to get up, and Juliet turned and went ahead to the door, eagerly waiting for the woman to catch up.

ACT II.

SCENE V.

FRJAR Lawrence and Romeo sat in tall chairs before the fireplace in the abbey's receiving room, looking at the burning logs, as they awaited the arrival of the bride. Romeo sat in a light green gown, with faint floral patterns stitched in. He wore the vial containing Loki's Breath as a pendant, which glowed blue in the dim room. He beamed at his thoughts of his bride-to-be, only vaguely hearing the words of the friar.

"...so will smile the heavens upon this holy act," Friar Lawrence said. "Even after hours as it may be."

"Amen, amen," Romeo said. "Come what sorrow ever may, it cannot countervail the exchange of joy that one short minute gives me in her sight. Do thou but close our hands with holy words, and then after that, love-devouring death may do what he dare; it is enough that I may have ever but called her my wife."

"Dear son, you worry me when you speak at such extremes. These violent delights have violent ends, and in their triumph die; like fire and powder, which, as they kiss, consume. Therefor, love moderately; long love doth so."

From their chairs the two men heard the abbey door open, a shouting of "Fie!," and the excited clicking of nails on the foyer's stonework floor.

Romeo bolted upwards to his feet and shouted, "Juliet!"

Instantly the tapping came bounding for the receiving room. Romeo and Juliet met halfway, in the chapel room, falling into a hug which led the way to many kisses, before

the Friar arrived to break it up. Yanking Romeo up by the back of his dress, the friar chided, "Come, come with me, and we will make short work; for, by your leaves, you shall not stay alone till holy church incorporate two as one. Angelica, please, come join, and bear witness."

The friar led the small procession up the aisle, and bid Juliet to sit, and Romeo to kneel before her, face to face. The friar spoke on the divinity of love, and recited much of his thoughts on Adam and the beasts of the field. Lastly he spoke vows: to Romeo to love and to serve Juliet above all others, especially above himself; to Angelica and to the friar himself, to watch over this marriage, and to ensure Romeo kept his vow; to all three humans, to attest tonight Juliet's love of her husband-to-be. With all of these vows spoken and agreed to, Friar Lawrence lifted Romeo's hand and Juliet's forepaw, placed the paw in the hand, and pronounced them married. The husband and the wife kissed, and then embraced, Romeo shedding tears of joy, Juliet carefully licking them off. The friar brought out a bottle of wine from the cellar, and a quiet, happy night was had before Angelica and the friar each fell asleep in their chairs. Quietly so as not to wake the sleeping elders, Romeo and Juliet exited the abbey and pranced through the Verona streets, towards the house of one who once called themselves a prince, though now would sooner deny it. Romeo knocked at the door.

There was silence from within for a bit, until a bleary-eyed Mercutio opened the door, with Benvolio standing close behind them. Seeing that their guest was friendly company, Benvolio stepped forward and wrapped himself sleepily around Mercutio, facing his cousin while his chin found perch on the former prince's shoulder.

"Romeo? 'Tis late," Mercutio said. "Are you drunk? Stolen the Capulets' dog, I see, good work."

"I have had but a little wine. Primarily I am drunk off of happiness. I am wed, the Capulets' dog my bride."

Mercutio's mouth hung open a small bit as they sought words, and found either none at all or too many at once.

Benvolio removed himself from Mercutio and stepped around them to warmly embrace the newly wed Romeo. "On my life, a great couple you'll be."

Romeo hugged his cousin back.

"Is this the very spot for a honeymoon?" Mercutio asked.

"I felt it unwise for either of us to dwell about the house of the other's father tonight. I was hoping this may prove a neutral haven."

"Yes," Mercutio said, and turned to walk back inside, leaving the door open for their guests. Romeo and Juliet entered, and Benvolio closed door. "Take any room you'd like," Mercutio said, and then yawned. "In that offer, I include the master bed to which I and your cousin retire, should you change your mind about anything."

"A great many things I'd have to change my mind a great deal on," Romeo returned.

"Not so great many, and not so greatly drastic either, I promise you as someone who has seen all sides of it. To bed, though. 'Tis late, and I may fall asleep as the very words come from my mouth. *Adieu*."

"Tell me more in the morning," Benvolio said, leaning in to speak quietly to his cousin. "Until then, I wish you both a good night."

Mercutio and Benvolio ascended the stairs, headed towards the master bedroom. Romeo led the way to a cozy bedroom on the first floor, in the opposite corner to the master bed. There in their secluded chambers, the newly wed husband and wife found their way onto the bed, and a passionate interchange began: nearing the height of it, Romeo opened the vial containing Loki's Breath, inhaled its contents, and but short moments later was his seed received by his bride.

In the morning, Romeo awakened well rested and well accompanied, the warm and soft-haired Juliet tucked in against him, he on his back, her with her back pressed

firmly against his side down the length of both of their bodies. A soft breeze came in through the window, but the air around the bed was the breath of Juliet and the breath of himself, together—together for more than a spurious moment, but for a night, for a lifetime; he looked forward to a lifetime of mornings like this one. He laid a long time like this, until eventually, some stirring he made awakened Juliet, and she stretched out, extending her paws forward and digging her shoulder blades back into Romeo. He rolled onto his side to face her. Face buried in her fur, he began petting the hound down her body in long strokes. He scratched at her lower back, encouraging her to roll over onto her back. With her on her back, Romeo rubbed the dog's belly a long while until she was satisfied, and then concluded it with a kiss to the front of her mouth before arising from bed. Picking out garments from the wardrobe in the room, Romeo dressed in a white shirt and a pair of brown trousers, and then left to go make breakfast for himself, his wife, and their hosts.

With the smell of the cooking, Benvolio was summoned down the stairs. They ate at the dining room table, and afterwards moved to the living room to continue their conversation, Romeo and Juliet on a couch, Benvolio in a cushioned chair. The cousins sipped tea as they spoke.

Mercutio came down the stairs some time later, dished themselves up a plate, and with the dish in hand came and weaseled their way in beside Benvolio on the chair.

Romeo pointed out the living room's window to a house across the street. "What can you tell me of who owns that house there?"

Mercutio swallowed the food they'd been chewing, and then answered, "Tis owned by the rats, and what a lovely home they've made of it. The grandrats have portraits hung up in the foyer of all the little—nay, I will not even joke of rats owning property with you, as you'd take it as earnestly as if I'd said that the house was owned by Queen Elizabeth. But as to the deed to the property as concerns

we silly human creatures, I believe such a deed is long since lost, forgotten, burned up, crumbled to dust, pulped in the sea, used as a tissue for a rich man's nose and then screwed up into a ball and tossed in the rubbish. In short, the house is derelict."

"Then perhaps if the rats would accept co-ownership with a silly human creature such as this one and the best of the hounds to match, I would seek ownership of the place."

"You would be welcome neighbors," Mercutio said, and went in unto their food once more.

By and by, Romeo and Juliet did move in to the house, doing a great deal of fixing-up, making the place theirs. Guests came often, Mercutio and Benvolio, Angelica and Friar Lawrence, sitting about and making merry chat, checking in, telling tales. As the weeks went on, Juliet became heavy with child, and Romeo tended to her with all the more devout of care. Two months and a week after the night of the wedding, Angelica and Romeo assisted Juliet as she gave birth to a litter of twelve Great Dane puppies.

III

ACT THREE
CONTAINING FIVE SCENES

*The prince could never cause those households so agree,
But that some sparkles of their wrath as yet remaining be;
Which lie this while raked up in ashes pale and dead
Till time do serve that they again in wasting flame may spread.*

ACT III.

SCENE I.

BENVOLIO and Mercutio sat on a bench at the edge of a public square. One year and some months had passed since the marriage of Romeo and Juliet. Paige, a family friend whose company Mercutio had not been blessed with since the former prince had forsaken their family and left the castle, sat beside Mercutio on the bench. She was turned to face them, and with careful attention, was stenciling a drawing of an enormous spider on Mercutio's bicep. Though she gave her artistic talent into it in earnest, she made the drawing to convince Mercutio out of the tattoo, rather than into it.

Beside Mercutio and Paige, Benvolio finished reading from the letter that Romeo had passed on earlier in the day: "...thou lowest thief, thou most unnatural sinner, thou wretched villain, thy days be short. Signed, Tybalt."

"His letters grow longer by the day," Mercutio observed.

"Aye. I pray thee, good Mercutio, good Paige, let's retire. The day is hot, the Capulets abroad, and if we meet, we shall not scape a brawl; for now, these hot days, is the mad blood stirring."

"Pah! Thou art like one of those fellows that, when he enters the confines of a tavern, claps me his sword upon the table, and says, 'God send me no need of thee!' and, by the operation of the second cup, draws it on the drawer, when, indeed, there is no need."

Benvolio snorted in a laugh. "Am I indeed like such a fellow?"

"Come, come, thou art as hot a Jack in thy mood as any in Italy," Mercutio went on. "And as soon moved to be moody, and as soon moody to be moved."

"Moved to what, pray tell?"

"Come, hast thou not bound across half the city to enter a quarrel?"

"To break that quarrel up, and nothing more."

"So you say, so you say."

"Indeed, so I do," Benvolio said, and clapped his hand on Mercutio's thigh, giving them a couple of caring pats.

Patronized, Mercutio turned their head to Benvolio and snapped their teeth shut threateningly, producing a discomfiting *click!* beside the kindly man's ear.

Benvolio flinched away from this, shuddered, and then, turning back to face the square, saw a man enter the square in a flashy red garb, two heads taller than any else, hand clenched on his sword's hilt as he scanned over the square's occupants. Tybalt.

"By my head, here come the Capulets," Benvolio warned.

"By my heel, I care not."

Spotting Benvolio and Mercutio, Tybalt made his approach. Benvolio and Mercutio stood to meet him. At a whispered word of advice from Mercutio, Paige stood and backed far away from the imminent exchange.

"Gentlemen, good day," Tybalt said, coming to a halt before Benvolio and Mercutio. "A word with one of you."

"But one word with one of us?" Mercutio asked. "Couple it with something: make it a word and a blow."

Tybalt's eye twitched. "You shall find me apt enough for that, sir, if you will give me occasion."

"Are you not the manliest of men, as you so pretend? Could you not take some occasion without having to be given it?"

"Mercutio, thou consort'st with Romeo—"

"Consorted notes, matching harmony!" Mercutio interrupted. "Dost thou make us minstrels? If thou make minstrels of us, look to hear nothing but discords." Placing

a hand on their hilt, Mercutio added, "Here's my fiddlestick; here's that shall make you dance. Zounds, consort!"

Benvolio hovered a hand over the handle of the wishing sword. As calming as he could, he interjected, "We talk here in the public haunt of men; either withdraw unto some private place, and reason coldly of your grievances, or else depart; here all eyes gaze on us."

Mercutio turned their head away from both men and spat. "Men's eyes were made to look, and let them gaze; I will not budge for no man's pleasure, I."

Benvolio spotted, behind the imposing Tybalt, Romeo passing alone through the square on his own business. Romeo, spotting Benvolio, began marching swiftly over at once. Tybalt, seeing Benvolio's gaze, turned and saw Romeo as well.

"Well, here comes my man. Peace be with you, sirs," Tybalt said, and turned to regard Romeo.

At sirs, Mercutio snarled. They opened their mouth to cast mockery at the tall villain once more, but then felt their hand taken in Benvolio's, the fingers interlocked, the grip tight. Mercutio stayed their tongue, if but only for the moment.

Romeo came and stood before Tybalt, turning his neck upwards to look the Capulet in the eyes.

"Romeo," Tybalt uttered, "the hate I bear thee can afford no better term than this: thou art a villain."

"Tybalt," Romeo said in return, "the reason that I have to love thee doth much excuse the rage one might ordinarily associate with such a greeting as yours. Villain I am none: therefore, farewell; I see thou know'st me not."

As Romeo turned to leave, Tybalt shouted, "Boy, this shall not excuse the injuries that thou hast done to me; therefor turn back, and draw!"

Romeo did turn back, though left his hands off of his sabre. "I do protest I never injured thee, but love thee better than thou canst devise; for, I'm sure from your

letters that you are aware of my marriage, which among many other happy consequences, has made you and I kinsman, my cousin Tybalt. And so, good Capulet, which name I tender as dearly as my own, be satisfied not with my steel which you sought, but with my loving words which I offer."

Behind Tybalt, Mercutio lifted their head and screamed into the air. All turned to face them. After expelling the whole contents of their lungs and then drawing in another breath, Mercutio shouted to Tybalt and Romeo, "Oh calm, dishonorable, vile submission! *Alla stoccata* carries it away!" With that, Mercutio drew. "Tybalt, you rat catcher! Will you walk?"

"What wouldst thou have with me?"

"Good king of cats, nothing but one of your nine lives; of that, I mean to make bold withdrawal; and, as you shall see thereafter, I will dry-beat the rest of the eight. Will you pluck your sword out of his pilcher by the ears? Make haste, lest mine be about your ears before it be out."

"I am for you," Tybalt said, and drew.

Between the two erupted a lightshow of glinting steel, as Romeo and Benvolio drew their swords to break up the brawl. Dashing forth, Romeo swung his sword down in the midst of the combatants' strikes to knock their swords off their mark; and as it happened, a mark of Tybalt's which Mercutio had deflected upwards, Romeo deflected back down, causing Tybalt's steel to strike through Mercutio's chest.

Tybalt turned to Romeo. Sensing the appraising look, Romeo threw down his blade, showing the antithesis of provocation. Mercutio fell. Tybalt turned and sped away.

"I am hurt," came a faint voice from the ground.

Romeo and Benvolio—Benvolio in tears—knelt on either side of Mercutio.

"A plague o' both your houses!" Mercutio shouted after Tybalt, tilting their head to where the Capulet had run, then also leveling their gaze on the two Montague cousins

before them. Mercutio began to sit up, and then in pain collapsed back to the ground. "Tis lovely, this ground. I think I shall make my new home here."

"Art thou so badly hurt?" Benvolio asked.

"Aye, aye, a scratch, a scratch. Merry, tis enough. Where is that Tybalt? Is he gone, and hath nothing? Where is my Paige? Go, villain, fetch a surgeon."

Paige, who hovered nearby, ran off.

"Have courage, wonderful Mercutio," Romeo said. "The hurt cannot be much."

"No, tis not so deep as a well, nor so wide as a church-door, but tis enough, twill serve: ask for me tomorrow and you shall find me a grave host. I am peppered, I warrant, for this world. A plague o' both your houses! Zounds, a dog, a rat, a mouse, a cat, to scratch a star to death! A braggart, a rogue, a villain, that fights by the book of arithmetic! Romeo, why the devil came you between us? I was hurt under your arm."

"I thought all for the best."

Mercutio put a grasp around Benvolio's forearm. "Help me into some house, Benvolio, or I shall..."

Words unfinished, Mercutio fainted, and died.

After some silent moments, Benvolio spoke. "That gallant spirit hath aspired the clouds, which too untimely here did scorn the earth."

Marching footsteps approached. The Montague cousins raised their heads, and saw Tybalt returning, sabre in hand. Romeo stood, drew, and marched forward to meet him. As they neared, Romeo scolded, "Alive, in triumph! And Mercutio slain!" The two stood at a lunge's length from one another. "Fire-eyed fury be my conduct now! Now, Tybalt, take that 'villain' back again that thou gavest me; for Mercutio's soul is but a little way above our heads, staying for thine to keep it company: either thou or I, or both, must go with."

Tybalt's hand flexed around his drawn sword, holding the instrument more as a club than as a sabre. "Thou,

wretched boy, that didst consort him here, shalt with him hence.”

Romeo flourished his blade. “This shall determine that.”

Tybalt whipped around in a complete circle, to strike Romeo with the heavy blow of all his whirling momentum: the first half of the circle, he completed on his feet; halfway, as he faced away from Romeo, Romeo stepped forward and stabbed the tip of his sword into the back of Tybalt’s neck, severing his brain from his body; the second half of the circle, Tybalt completed on momentum alone as he fell to the ground dead.

Benvolio came up and stood beside Romeo. “How such a devout lover and a deadly surgeon came to live in you together, I know not.”

“One needs defend love, at times.”

“Perhaps. Perhaps.”

Around Romeo and Benvolio, a crowd of citizens was beginning to form.

Leaning to Romeo, Benvolio advised, “Stand not amazed. No matter the circumstances leading up to it, here before us a royal and a Capulet lay slain. The prince will doom thee to death if thou art taken. Hence, be gone, away.”

As more and more realization sunk in, tears came anew to Romeo’s eyes. “Oh. Oh, I am fortune’s fool.”

“Why dost thou stay?” Benvolio prodded, and pushed Romeo, forcing the first of his cousin’s footsteps.

In haste, Romeo made off.

Benvolio remained at the scene until by and by arrived Prince Escalus, his musketeers, Lord and Lady Capulet, and Lord and Lady Montague.

The musketeers encircled the scene of Benvolio and the bodies.

Prince Escalus beheld Mercutio, his own sibling, for a wounded moment, before his eyes fixed on Benvolio. “Where are the vile beginners of this fray?”

“Oh noble prince, I can enlighten all of the unlucky unfolding of this fatal brawl. There lies the man, slain by young Romeo, that slew thy kinsperson, brave Mercutio.”

“Tybalt!” Lady Capulet cried, as she arrived at the perimeter of the scene. She pushed past the musketeers, and knelt at her slain kinsman’s head. Rapidly she muttered things to the corpse. Then, looking up at Escalus, she said, “Prince, as thou art true, for blood of ours shed blood of Montague.”

The prince looked again to Benvolio. “Who began this bloody fray?”

“Tybalt,” Benvolio answered in short, and then at length explained what had preceded.

“He is kinsman to the Montague,” Lady Capulet said when he was done. “Affection makes him false. He speaks not true. If Tybalt is struck down, then there needs have been twenty of them against him in this black strife, and all those twenty could but kill one life. I beg for justice, which thou, prince, must give: Romeo slew Tybalt, Romeo must not live.”

The prince considered. “Romeo merely slew him that slew Mercutio. Who shall carry the price of my kin’s blood?”

“Not Romeo, Prince,” Old Montague said, stepping forward. “He was Mercutio’s friend. He but concluded what the law should end: the life of Tybalt.”

Escalus again beheld the slain body of his Mercutio. In Benvolio, he knew, not a hostile bone could be found. But if there was fault left to be found for his kinsperson’s death, he would execute it. The prince gave his ruling: “This strife never would have had wind to breathe if not for that Romeo.” As he spoke, his mind flashed back to a year and some months prior, speaking with his father before the scrying glass, inquiring of the sad fate that would befall Romeo. As the prince went on, he trembled in a helpless and immense power, sadness, inevitability, betrayal of none and all, unavoidable fate; on the subject

of Romeo, the prince in regretted intensity resumed: "And for that offense, immediately we do exile him hence. I have an interest in your hate's proceeding: my blood for your rude brawls doth lie a-bleeding; but I'll amerce you with so strong a fine, that you shall all repent the death of mine. I will be deaf to pleading and excuses; nor tears nor prayers shall purchase out abuses." The prince spoke his final verdict: "From hence forth, Romeo is banished from Verona: if he should be found here, that hour should be his last. What's more, his property is forfeit to the crown: the hound Juliet shall be returned to the Capulets, but even her pups, as payment for blood here spilt, shall henceforth be the king's."

ACT III.

SCENE II.

JULIET laid in front of the couch, watching all of her pups at play.

At the sound of the front door's knob being turned, Juliet wagged her tail and turned her head to see who was home. In through the door bursted Angelica, sobbing. The woman threw herself on the floor beside Juliet, and patted her while speaking Romeo's name in concerned sentence after sentence. Juliet inched closer to Angelica and laid a paw and her chin over the woman, protecting her.

After a time, Angelica stood. She went and found a lead, and attached it to Juliet. The woman pulled Juliet towards the door. Juliet resisted, and when Angelica insisted, Juliet growled. Angelica let up for a moment. Juliet looked around at all of her pups.

Angelica sighed, and knelt with Juliet. "I know, dear. Believe me, I know."

With a surprising strength that caught Juliet off guard, Angelica picked the hound up off of her feet, and carried her out the door. Placed down, even outside, Juliet resisted, lingering at the door, facing to get back in. Angelica sighed again, manipulated the lead to be tight around Juliet's neck, and with more insistent pulling, Angelica forced the issue, dragging Juliet away.

When they were inside the Capulet manor and the door closed behind them, Angelica let Juliet off the lead. She began to offer an apology, but the hound walked off, nails tapping on the floor as she went.

Angelica sat on a couch for a time and sobbed. In another room, she could hear the lord and lady sobbing as well for their lost Tybalt.

After some hours, night fell. Angelica rose up from the couch and went to find the hound. It was not a difficult search: on the second floor, Juliet laid on a bed looking out a window at the moonlit back yard.

“Shame come to Romeo,” Angelica cursed.

Juliet growled.

“What, will you speak well of him that killed your cousin?”

Juliet made a disapproving vocalization, and replanted her chin on the bed, waiting for her man.

Angelica could find no fault with the wife and mother so suddenly stolen away from both parts of herself. “Wait in this chamber: I’ll find Romeo to comfort you. I know well where he is. Hark ye, your Romeo will be here this night: I’ll go to him. He is hid at Lawrence’s cell.”

Juliet pointedly ignored Angelica, and remained vigilant in her watch out the back window.

Angelica departed, and began on her way to the abbey to make well on her promise.

ACT III.

SCENE III.

ROMEO sat at a small table in the abbey's cellar. On the table was a glass of water. Romeo tried to pick it up, but as he held it, the water shook about too tumultuously to drink, and he shakily set the glass back down.

Hearing footsteps above, Romeo went and hid behind stacked furniture stored in the cellar.

The visitor, reaching the bottom of the stairs, called out, and from the voice it was Friar Lawrence: "Romeo, come forth; come forth, thou fearful man. By Jesu, affliction is enamored of thy parts, and thou art wed to calamity."

Romeo emerged from his hiding place and met the friar. "Father, what news? What is the prince's doom? What sorrow craves my acquaintance?"

"Not death," the friar said, "but body's banishment: the prince has banished you from Verona, and claimed all your possessions forfeit."

Romeo let out a sigh of relief and sat back onto his chair. His hands still shook, but he made himself able to drink the water. "The world is broad and wide. If Juliet and I are condemned to be sojourners, I mind not," Romeo said. Then, "Father, why do you look at me with such pity?"

"The world is broad and wide; that much, you hath stolen from my very lips. But alas, tis the latter punishment you miss. Your possessions are taken: to the king go the pups, and back to the Capulets goes Juliet."

Romeo stood, knocking his chair back as he went up. From his scabbard he drew out his sabre, grabbed it by the

blade, and held the point to his neck. "If Romeo is banished, then tell me, friar, tell me, in what vile part of this anatomy doth my name lodge? Tell me, that I may cut out the hateful—"

The friar snatched away Romeo's sword. "Art thou a madman?"

Romeo craned over the friar. "There is no world outside Verona walls, but Purgatory, Torture, Hell itself. Hence, 'banished' is banished from the world, and the world's exile is death: thus, calling death merely 'banished,' you cutt'st my head off with a golden axe, and smilest upon the stroke that murders me."

The friar shot back, "Oh deadly sin! Oh rude unthankfulness! For thy crime the sentence is death; but the kind prince, taking thy side, hath brushed aside the law, and turned that black word death to banishment: this is dear mercy, and thou seest it not."

"Tis torture, and not mercy: heaven is here, where Juliet lives; and every butcher, and baker, and chemical-stained leather worker, every unworthy thing, lives here in Heaven, and may look on her; but Romeo may not. More validity, more honorable company, more courtship can now be found in Verona's flies than in Romeo: the flies may seize on the soft wonder of Juliet's paw, and steal immortal blessing from her jowls; but Romeo may not; he is banished; all this may the flies do, when I from this must fly. And say'st thou yet, that exile is not death? Hadst thou no poison prepared, no knife sharpened, no sudden means of death other than the proclamation of the word 'banished' to kill me? Oh friar, the damned use that word in hell; howling accompanies it. How hast thou the heart, being a divine, a ghostly confessor, a sin-absolver, and my friend professed, to mangle me with that word 'banished?'"

"Thou fond madman, hear me a little speak."

"Oh, thou wilt speak again of banishment!" Romeo moaned, and turned away to pace the cellar.

"I'll give thee armor to keep off that word," the friar promised.

"Unless that armor can reverse a prince's doom, it helps not: talk no more."

"Oh, so I see that madmen have no ears."

"How should they, when that wise men have no eyes."

Above, the abbey's door opened.

"Wait ye here," Friar Lawrence bid, and turned and ascended the stairs, keeping possession of Romeo's sabre. Halfway up, he paused, turned, and marched back down to whisper harshly, "Make no doubt that I have remembered my vow, even if you have forgotten yours: though banished, you will serve your wife yet. In time, dear son, all things in time."

A tremble wracked Romeo. "Spoken as one whose lovers' lives may last as many years as his own."

The friar opened his mouth to speak, paused at the first half-formed sound, and then bowed his head. "Indeed. Though madman I have called you, you have hit the mark exactly on at least one point: perhaps I am blind indeed."

Romeo shook his head. "I assure you, father: though my darkness has never made it easy, you have seen through me better than most."

The friar's dour face gave way to at least the beginnings of an enwarmed smile. The friar turned and ascended the stairs once more. At the top, he called, "Angelica? Indeed, he is over here, with his own tears made drunk."

"Oh, her case is much the same, much the same," Angelica said, following the friar down the steps.

"Oh, woeful sympathy," the friar said, shaking his head. "Piteous predicament."

The three stood regarding each other in the cellar.

"Where is she?" Romeo asked Angelica. "Is she well? And what says she, my concealed lady, of our cancelled love?"

“Oh, she says nothing sir, but lays on a bed and faces away from me. She won’t lift her chin to say a word or cast a glance.”

Though on instinct Romeo’s mind flashed to calamity, he caught himself before he could speak, and looked to the friar.

“Look lively, son,” the friar encouraged. “Thy Juliet is alive, for whose dear sake thou wast just lately self-proclaimed dead; there lies happy fortune. Tybalt would kill thee, but thou slew’st Tybalt; there lies happy fortune too. The law, that threatened death, becomes thy friend and turns it into exile; there lies happy fortune again. A pack of blessings sits upon thee; happiness courts thee; and yet, misbehaved and sullen, you pout upon thy fortune and thy love. I mean not to dwell, but only to warn you: take heed, for such die miserable.”

“I have lived miserable, and lived happy, and at this rate I may die as either unsurprised.”

The friar sighed, and went on. “Angelica, could’st thou keep a watch while our man Romeo makes a visit to our dear Juliet, to assure her he is yet alive?”

“A thousand times, yes. She shall spot you, Romeo, the moment you enter the back yard. I’m sure you’re still plenty able to steal across, and let her out the back to the hedges. I’ll shine a light from her back window when the way is clear. If I learn that the lord or lady or any else have occasion to seek Juliet, I shall ring the dinner bell, and you would be wise to flee.”

“Indeed, foolish not to,” the friar affirmed. “For if caught, you shall not be able to journey to Mantua, where thou shalt live—alone, for a time—till we can find a time to reunite your marriage, reconcile your friends, beg pardon of the prince, and call thee back to twenty hundred thousand times more joy than in thine lamentation you had left with. Angelica, get thee to the Capulet manor ahead of Romeo, and keep watch.”

"I could have stayed here all the night to hear your good counsel; but indeed, I shall go ahead."

"And you, Romeo," the friar said, as Angelica made her way up the stairs. "Go hence; good night; be gone before the watch be set. Sojourn in Mantua, and be no stranger to the abbeys there; I shall find a brother to relay to you, from time to time, every good thing that happens here." Friar Lawrence tossed Romeo's sabre away behind the stacked furniture, stepped forward, and hugged the young man. Once stepping back, the friar concluded: "Tis late. Farewell; good night."

"But that a joy past joy calls out on me, it were a grief so brief to part with thee: farewell."

ACT III.

SCENE IV.

LORD Capulet, Lady Capulet, and County Paris sat about in a room in the Capulet manor.

“This has all happened so suddenly,” the lord was saying, “that we have had no time to check in on Juliet. I tell you, she loved...” the lord hesitated a moment, before saying Romeo. He stole a sidelong glance at his wife, whose tears still stained her makeup, shed for Tybalt, who at Romeo’s hand was slain. The lord feigned a cough, and then reiterated, “I tell you, she loved Tybalt dearly, and so did I. Ah, well, we were born to die. In any case, in any case. For now, I would leave her to her solitude to get her rest. Tis late: I promise you, if not for your company, I would have been to bed an hour ago.”

Paris waved his hand about. “These times of woe afford no time to woo,” he said, as though capable of wooing any man woman or dog. “Sir, Madam, good night. As we made these plans a year ago you worried she was but young, but alas, she has been a mother now already, and so there must be no doubt it can be done. Now that she is free of that Montague, she shall be bred again for your benefit.”

The lady shuddered as she imagined the mechanics of the murderer of her nephew also being the sire of her hound’s first litter. What a wretched miracle it was to her, what an abject offensive waste. “I will bid her think well of you as soon as tomorrow morning,” the lady said, and truly was keen to move on from the terrible interlude of the last year, and go back to a time before that Montague

had stolen her girl. "Tonight, though, she is adjusting to all of the sudden change."

Lord Capulet stood, and came over to encourage County Paris to stand, so that he could begin walking the noble out. As they went, the lord said, "Sir Paris, I will make an earnest proposal of you to Juliet. I think she will be obedient to it—nay, I shall say it even stronger: I have not a single doubt. Wife, in the morning, go to her and acquaint her of this here Paris's good care; and bid her, mark you me, that next Wednesday—oh, hold on just a moment. What day is today?"

"Monday, my lord," Paris answered, still being pushed along towards the door by the lord's arm draped firmly about his shoulders.

"Monday! Ha ha! Well, Wednesday is too soon. Oh, let's say Thursday: bid Juliet, tell her, on Thursday, we shall have a feast as we celebrate giving her unto the care of this noble earl. Will you be ready? Do you like the haste? We'll keep no great ado; a friend or two. For, I'm sure you understand, Tybalt being slain so recently, it may be thought that we cared quite little of him, if we revel much. Therefore we'll have some half a dozen friends, and there no more. But alas, what say you to Thursday?"

"My lord, I wish that Thursday were tomorrow," Paris answered, as they arrived at the door.

Lord Capulet opened the door, walked County Paris a few firm steps out, and then retreated back indoors. From a door left only a slit open, Lord Capulet concluded, "Well, get you gone; on Thursday it will be, then; afore me, it is so very late that we may call it early by and by." With that, he closed the door.

With Paris dealt with, Lord Capulet made his relieved way to his awaiting bed, and fell deep into a sleep beside the lady who had retired as well.

With still breath, Angelica's head peeked into the room, observed the lord and lady asleep, and finally went to light a light to shine from Juliet's window.

ACT III.

SCENE V.

ROMEO and Juliet laid curled up close together upon the dew of the grass in the Capulets' garden. Dried tears stuck on Romeo's face as he held his wife close, knowing this would be the last time in some while that he would be able to hold her. The sky was showing the beginnings of lightening from the morning sun. If he was ever to hold his wife henceforth, he needed to be gone.

As he sat up, Juliet sat up with him. She pressed herself against him, leaning on him.

Romeo gave pause, and pet her a moment. Would that the morning lark who chirped was the nightingale, who nightly perched on the pomegranate tree. Would that yond light overhead was not daylight, but some meteor that the sun had exhaled, to be Romeo's torch-bearer on his way to Mantua, eventually, but not yet.

And yet it was the lark, who strained harsh discords and unpleasing sharps, and it was the sun, who burnt out night's heavenly candles, and it was time that Romeo was hence gone away. He stood. Juliet stood with him. He walked, and then ran, and then climbed over the Capulets' orchard wall, Juliet bounding after him until the wall, and barking after him when he had gone.

At the wall she laid down, and stayed a long while, hoping.

By and by, as the sun crested the horizon and then climbed higher, Lady Capulet came to Juliet's post. "*There*

you are," the lady said, and sat down on the grass, no longer wet with dew, beside Juliet.

The lady pet the hound for a moment, in her mechanical, raking way. Juliet did not feign to enjoy the petting, nor the company, and in fact wished for both to go away.

"Evermore weeping for your Tybalt's death? What, wilt thou wash him from his grave with tears? An if thou could'st, thou could'st not make him live. Therefore be done: some grief shows much of love, but much grief shows one stupid."

Juliet stood, walked away to the other corner of the back wall, and laid down away from Lady Capulet.

Lady Capulet scoffed, and looked across the yard at the hound incredulously.

A moment later, as the scorned lady still sat, the lord and Angelica arrived. The lady rose, brushed herself off, and all three humans convened around Juliet, who looked up at them nervously.

"What, still in tears?" Lord Capulet asked. "Evermore showering? Wife, have you delivered to her our decree regarding the county?"

"Aye," the lady lied, "but she has no interest in his name, Paris. Likely she does not remember him at all, the stupid mutt."

Juliet stood and began to leave again, but the lady bent over and barred her exit, holding the hound in place.

"What, somewhere else to be?" the lord asked, and in a flash, found himself angered. "How many years have we spent spoiling this dog, bringing her breed into the world to begin with, but to have that Montague brat quite literally steal her, have her for but half the time we did, and now she is too good for the company of those who had brought her up? Has she no interest in Paris at all? No interest in more pups, not halfblooded abominations spawned of a man, a Montague no less—bah, a Montague, no wonder the pups still looked like dogs. Has she no

interest in a litter of true fullblooded canine kind? Does she not give us thanks? Is she not proud? Does she not count herself blessed, unworthy as she is, that we have wrought so worthy a breeder to be her handler?"

Juliet whined, and tried to struggle past Lady Capulet, but the woman held her.

The lord continued, "Brace yourself against next Thursday, for then you shall be sent off with Paris, or I shall drag thee to his estate on a stretcher. Out, you green-sickness carrion! Out, you baggage!"

Juliet looked to Lord Capulet and began to make a pleading sound, but the lord interrupted and ranted on.

"Hang thee, young baggage! Disobedient wretch! I tell thee what—go with Paris on Thursday, or never after look me in the face. Whine not, bark not, do not beg a thing of me. We thought ourselves blessed that God had given us this remaining Great Dane, but now I see that this one is one too many. We are cursed to have her. Out! Out!"

Juliet barked as she went in and bit the hand of Lady Capulet, who shrieked as she reeled away. Freed, Juliet turned and barked at Lord Capulet to threaten him with the same or worse, and then ran away into the manor's open back door.

"Angelica," Lord Capulet said, "fetch a surgeon. Hush, hush: the bleeding is not so bad, wife, but we must have it seen to."

Angelica snorted, hocked, and then spit on Lord Capulet. "You are to blame, my lord, to rate her so."

Lord Capulet reeled as though bit himself, but found his angered footing capably: "Had I my longsword, I wouldn't know which of these dogs to put down first. Out! Out, you mumbling fool!"

"I speak no treason—"

"Out!"

Angelica turned and went into the manor after Juliet, looking back over her shoulder at the lord and lady many times on the journey.

Inside, she sought out Juliet, but found her not. After some time of this, she happened upon a servant dusting, and asked, "Have you seen Juliet?"

The servant paused his dusting. "What?"

"The dog, sir."

"Oh, yes, the dog."

"Have you seen the dog, sir?"

"Oh, yes, let it out the front a bit ago. Right mood it was in, I tell you."

IV

ACT FOUR
CONTAINING FIVE SCENES

*Whither shall he, alas, poor banished man, now fly?
What place of succour shall he seek beneath the starry sky?
Since she pursueth him, and him defames by wrong,
That in distress should be his fort, and only rampire strong.*

ACT IV.

SCENE I.

IN the abbey's receiving room, with daylight shining in through the window, Friar Lawrence stood with County Paris discussing whether the friar would be free to perform a blessing at the Capulet manor when Juliet was given into the county's care.

"On Thursday, sir? The time is very short."

"The lord Capulet will have it so," Paris answered, "and I am nothing slow to slack his haste."

"What says the lady to this?"

"The lady? Why, she agrees with her husband: the hound should be—"

"Pardon," the friar interrupted, waving a hand, "in invoking the title of Lady, I was referring to the hound. What says Juliet?"

"Oh. I do not know *that* lady's mind."

"Uneven is the course; I like it not."

Paris appeared to take this as an indication that the friar did not understand the request. He tried again at explaining the situation to the man. "Immoderately she weeps for Tybalt's death, and therefore have I spent little time with her; for Venus smiles not in—"

"Did she know Tybalt?"

Interrupted a second time, a cross look flashed onto County Paris's face. "What?"

"Lady Juliet: did she know Tybalt?"

"I... believe they had met."

"Does she know that he's died?"

"I..."

"What do you mean she *weeps*, sir? I worry whether you speak in metaphor to describe what you have seen, or whether you have merely heard a report containing metaphor and taken it as the real thing."

In quick speech, Paris responded, "Lord Capulet hastes her breeding in hopes it may cheer her, hence my haste in this matter."

To himself, the friar slowly pondered an excuse to slow the matter, without offending lord or royal with unjustified refusal. "If I may, when was the last time you yourself saw the lady?"

"The *dog*, friar; the hound; the bitch. If we mustn't speak in metaphors, I should think 'Lady' is right out, and furthermore of great insult."

"Fie! Insult indeed! What is a Lady?"

"I—" The County Paris looked to each side as though he expected some hidden audience, to whom he was the butt of the friar's unreason. "*What is a Lady?*"

"Yes. Define it, please."

"The... Well, a Lady is but the female counterpart of a Lord."

"And what is a Lord?"

"A man of wealth, of clout, well renowned, well esteemed."

"Tis known that Juliet is the female counterpart of Lord Romeo in every imaginable respect, and so yes, I do indeed find her to be a Lady, and no, I do not find such a thing *insulting* to Ladyship, rather I find insult in quite the opposite in your—" The friar cut himself off, made an aggravated curling of his fingers, and turned away to look through the window a moment. "I tell you outright, though I have no power to stop this transfer, I will not bless it. I see nothing here which deserves blessing."

Wroth, County Paris made his exit.

Friar Lawrence found his way to the cellar, poured himself a glass of wine, and returned up to the chapel. He

sat in a pew as he turned the altercation over and over in his mind. The fiery Lord Romeo had had some influence on him, it seemed: he had handled the situation rashly, thinking only seconds ahead instead of decades. He sat in regret long after the glass of wine was finished.

At the door, the friar heard a scratching. Bolting up from the pew, the friar went and opened the door. In came Juliet. She pressed herself sidelong against the friar's leg, nearly knocking him over with her size and strength. The friar bent over and rubbed her sides, and spoke praises to the fact that she was visiting, though her reason for it remained at least somewhat of a mystery. "Come to make confession?" the friar asked, continuing to rub Juliet. "If but you could, t'would resolve much, I think. Alas, alas."

The friar closed the door. With this done, Juliet began to mill about the abbey, sniffing intently all along on every unassuming surface which by her skilled nose could be reached. As the Lady went over the space, the friar watched her, and pondered to himself. God had joined the hearts of Romeo and Juliet; here in the chapel, the friar himself had joined their hands. By his hand they would not remain separated, though he strained the limits of his wits in conjuring up how to go about such a task wisely.

Juliet sniffed at the friar's discarded wine glass which sat on the pew, and at that, Friar Lawrence had it. Using herbs collected from the garden, the friar began at work on concocting a vial, the likes of which, when drank, would cause a cold and drowsy humor to run through the veins; no pulse would keep its time, but cease; no warmth, no breath, would testify to life; for two days, the drinker of the vial would appear dead; and then afterwards, the drinker would awaken as though from a pleasant sleep. The friar would return Juliet to the Capulets' household, and insist upon remaining present, to prepare the blessing for the Thursday next. In the night he would administer the drink to Lady Juliet, who, being found deceased in the morning, the friar would advocate she be not buried in the dirt, but

with the respect she deserved of: placed in the same ancient vault where all the kindred Capulets lie. In the meantime, by letters sent to Mantua, Romeo would know of the plot, and come to be present when Juliet awoke in the vault. From there, with Juliet known to be dead and therefore sought after no longer, Romeo would be free to steal her away to Mantua unpursued, and there, in peace again at last, could they live.

Twas imperfect: twas underhanded; twas riddled with risk; twas not yet accounting for the humanly lord and houndly lady's confiscated pups; but in the rashness of all else, the friar entertained the idea that perhaps, in the spirit of those he aided here, it may be better to go fast and stumble than to stand still and be knocked dead.

ACT IV.

SCENE II.

ANGELICA sat in a rocking chair on the second floor of the Capulet manor, looking out at the front yard and the street beyond. There was an unpleasant mood in the manor. Even as Angelica was alone, she felt eyes on her, condemning her from this place for condemning its lord the day before.

Coming up the street, Angelica spied the handsome profile of Juliet, walking about this way and that with her nose to the ground, as Friar Lawrence held her lead and tried to keep up. Angelica quite nearly called for the lord and lady of the house, but caught herself before the noise escaped her. She would see for herself first what this was about. She arose from the chair, hurried down the stairs, and met the friar at the door before he had chance to knock.

Juliet timidly approached. Angelica held out her hand for the hound. The hound sniffed, wagged, and pressed herself against the woman. Angelica rubbed at her side, saying, "Look who returns from confession with such a merry look." Looking up to the friar, she added, "She bit Lady Capulet yesterday, and ran out."

The friar was genuinely taken aback. "Did she?"

Angelica looked back over her shoulder, and, seeing no one else present, leaned in close to the friar's ear. "Twas very deserved. She should have bitten the lord too." Stepping back from whispering, she asked, "Is Juliet truly back of her own will?"

“Yes, I could scarcely keep up with her. I spoke with County Paris and her earlier in the day. She appears keen on him.”

Angelica, now, was taken aback. “A right change of heart that is. What of Romeo?”

The friar braced before giving misguidance: “Romeo has sworn to serve Juliet, and we have sworn to make him, and we have attested Juliet’s love of Romeo. But never did we make Juliet vow a vow. Could you imagine? If she is agreeable to Paris, as I have now seen, then I will bless her transfer to his stewardship. If the lord would be so kind as to alert the county to this, I would appreciate it greatly, as I feel my own conversation with the county was mired in misunderstanding when we spoke before.”

“Well! If it suits Juliet, it suits me perfectly well, perfectly well. Lord! Lady!” Angelica called, turning and walking into the manor, leaving the way open for the hound and the friar. “Juliet has returned, and with changed heart!”

By and by, Lord Capulet came to the front door to meet with the friar and the hound. “Friar Lawrence! Has Angelica told me true of Juliet’s newfound devotion?”

“Indeed, indeed. She has met the county at my abbey, and though she is modest about it, she takes quite a liking to Paris. If it would please you, I might ask to stay with her these days until her transfer, to assure her it’s all quite alright.”

“Why, I am gladdened to hear it. This is well. Yes, please, you are our guest. For now though, if you’ll pardon,” Lord Capulet said, and then turned into the manor, and began calling to each of his servants: “You there! Fetch the County Paris! The transfer is on once more! You there! Fetch me twenty cooks! You! Seek out this list of guests, and invite them hither! Ah, my heart is wondrous light, since this same wayward girl is so reclaimed!”

ACT IV.

SCENE III.

IN the Capulets' bathing room, Friar Lawrence and Angelica ran buckets of water over Juliet, washing the soap from her coat. When the water no longer ran with suds, the man and the woman took to the hound with towels, drying her as she leaned into the rubbing, kicking one of her hind legs as she stood. With Juliet dried, the friar declared, "There's a clean lady, ready for tomorrow. But, gentle Angelica, I pray thee, leave me to ward over Juliet tonight; I can tell she has many a regret over her actions with the Lady Capulet, and I feel it may be better if she were with someone who is a stranger to this house."

"Tis well," Angelica conceded, though, knowing Juliet would soon be gone from her life, she did miss the opportunity to spend any remaining time with her. To Juliet, Angelica said, "Get thee to bed, and rest; for thou hast need of it."

As Friar Lawrence and Angelica exited the washing room and made their way in separate directions down the hall, the friar called, "Come this way, Juliet!"

Juliet looked between the two, and then agreeably followed after the friar.

There in the bedchambers, as Juliet laid on the bed awaiting the friar to join so they could sleep, the friar produced the vial he had prepared. He sat at the foot of the bed, peering into the contents inside. Placing a gentle hand on the houndly lady's back, he said, "Farewell, Juliet—God knows if we shall meet again. I have a faint cold fear

that thrills through my veins, that almost freezes up the heat of life." The friar shook his head. "By my vow, great lady, you and your man shall be reunited."

Friar Lawrence removed the top of the vial. With gentle insistence, he held open Juliet's maw with one hand—she tried to keep her mouth closed, but would not bite the friar, and so reluctantly allowed him to do as he did. With his other hand, he poured the vial's contents onto her tongue. The hound reeled, but the friar held her, forcing her to face up, for the slow liquid to fall down into her throat and take to its work.

In but a few seconds, there was no longer struggle. Juliet fell limp on the bed, dead to the world, as she would remain for two days' time.

ACT IV.

SCENE IV.

LORD and Lady Capulet, Angelica, and several servants stirred about, preparing a great feast, making decorations ready for the approaching day.

“Come, stir, stir, stir!” Lord Capulet instructed, walking past the cook at the pots. “Angelica, go to market and fetch more baked meats; spare not for cost.”

“The sun is not yet risen, my lord: tis too early to find anyone at the market. And for you, tis too late at night: get ye to bed, or you’ll be sick tomorrow for having stayed up all night at this work.”

“Bah! I have stayed at a watch all night for a lesser cause, and it has never caused me to be ill.”

“Aye,” Lady Capulet interjected, “you have been on errands at all hours of the night, in your time. But I, having slept and risen already, will take the remainder of this night’s watch.”

Lord Capulet bowed his head. “Tis well. Thank you, wife.” He made his exit towards the bedchambers, but on the way stopped to speak with some servants carrying logs and spits. “Now, fellow, what’s all this?”

“Things for the cook, sir, but I know not what.”

“Make haste, make haste. You, fellow, fetch drier logs. Peter may show you where they are, if you haven’t a head to find them out yourself. For if—good faith, tis day! The county will arrive any moment, in his eagerness at this occasion.”

From outside, the blasting of royal trumpets sounded, signaling the County Paris's formal approach.

"Angelica!" Lord Capulet called, turning back to the kitchen. "Angelica! Go waken Juliet, go and make sure she is groomed and prim. I'll go and chat with Paris. Make haste, make haste, the county is at the door already; make haste, I say."

ACT IV.

SCENE V.

IN a sweet tone, Angelica called through the closed door to the bedchamber. "Friar Lawrence! Juliet!"

There came no answer from within.

Lightly she rapped at the door, expecting a great barking from the other side in response. Still, no answer from within came. She knocked louder, and again, nothing.

"Juliet?"

Gently, Angelica opened the door to the bedchamber. Standing at the doorway, she sweetly called, "Friar Lawrence, the hour is early, but tis time to wake."

Friar Lawrence, feigning he had slept a moment the night before, rubbed his eyes and sat up in bed. "Good morning, Angelica."

"Aye, a happy morning for a happy day. Juliet, come, you slug-a-bed!" Angelica stepped into the room, calling on her way, "What, not a word? Tis good you get your sleep now, for I warrant you'll soon want to sleep for a week. Madam." Angelica pushed at the unmoving hound. "Madam! I must needs wake—help! Help! Help! Alas, alas!" Angelica turned and exited down the hall, shouting, "Juliet is dead! Oh well-a-day that ever I was born! My lord! My lady!"

Friar Lawrence rose out of bed. He laid a gentle hand on Juliet. He remained close at her side. Angelica returned, leading along the Lord and Lady Capulet, saying, "Look, look! Oh heavy day!"

Lady Capulet gasped, and Lord Capulet stood with his mouth agape. Friar Lawrence, with no need of acting, stood somber.

In tears, Lady Capulet approached Juliet, and raked her rigid fingers up and down through her coat. "Revive. Look up. Look up, Juliet!"

Lord Capulet approached, knelt at the bedside, and laid his hands gently on the hound, lifting her limbs, prodding her tongue. "She's cold; her blood is settled; her joints are stiff. Life and these lips have long been separated." The lord wiped at his tears. "Death lies on her like an untimely frost upon the sweetest flower of all the field."

As the Capulets mourned in quiet sniffles, Friar Lawrence heard the sound of slow footsteps approaching up the passageway outside. Into the doorway appeared the County Paris.

The county asked, "Is the hound ready to depart?"

Lord Capulet looked up at the oblivious man. "Ready to depart, but never to return." He let out a shaking sigh. "The night before the ceremony, hath Death lain with thy bitch. See here she lies, flower as she was, deflowered by him. Death is now my only heir; my last hound hath he inherited; I will die and leave him all; life, living, all is Death's."

The county was dumbstruck. "After all this, after as long as I have waited to see this morning's face, and it doth give me such a sight as this?"

Lady Capulet stood and briskly exited the room, knocking past the county on her way through.

"Ay me! Lady, what—"

Lady Capulet spun about and stood on her toes to look him level in the eyes. "Be gone when I return or I shall make thee gone, beginning with thy tongue."

The county found no response, and the lady turned and left. Elsewhere, it began to sound as though one was stomping through the walls themselves.

The county looked to Lord Capulet and Friar Lawrence.

"I would listen to the lady," Lord Capulet advised.

The county sputtered, cursed, and left.

Friar Lawrence knelt down beside Lord Capulet, facing the unmoving hound with him. Gently, the friar intoned, "Heaven and yourself had part in this Great Dane; now Heaven hath all, and all the better it is for the Dane. Your part in her you could not keep from death; but Heaven keeps his part in eternal life. The most you sought was her promotion; weep ye now, seeing she is advanced above the clouds, as high as Heaven itself? She is well. Come, lay rosemary on this corpse—she is your last of a great breed, and I shall insist she be treated with all the custom of your family. Bear her to church, and in the Capulets' vault shall she be placed."

V

ACT FIVE
CONTAINING THREE SCENES

*When he doth hear abroad the praise of ladies blown,
Within his thought he scorneth them, and doth prefer his own.
When pleasant songs he hears, while others do rejoice,
The melody of music doth stir up his mourning voice.
But if in secret place he walk somewhere alone,
The place itself and secretness redoubleth all his moan.
Then speaks he to the beasts, to feathered fowls and trees,
Unto the earth, the clouds, and to whatso beside he sees.
To them he shew' th his smart, as though they reason had.
Each thing may cause his heaviness, but nought may make him
glad.
And, weary of the day, again he calleth night,
The sun he curseth, and the hour when first his eyes saw light.
And as the night and day their course do interchange,
So doth our Romeus' nightly cares for cares of day exchange.*

ACT V.

SCENE I.

ROMEO sat at a pavilion on a riverbank, staring at the rippling ridges of the water. Rivers encompassed the city of Mantua, marking the bounds of his prison here. The rippling water seemed to be the only thing close to life within this dull city, and even this water was likely only lively as it fought to keep the greater world at bay, isolated from interest, sheltering its own monotony. A faint rain fell. The same faint rain had fallen since Romeo had arrived in the city. Never a storm, never something so solid as a raindrop, but a constant purgatory mist descending on the lands. One could never face in the direction of the sun without spotting a rainbow hanging about.

Romeo had had a dream the night before. He spoke to himself regarding the dream as he thought it over; he spoke to the river as he had so often seen Friar Lawrence speak to the plants.

"If I may trust the faltering eye of sleep, my dreams presage some joyful news at hand. My bosom's lord sits lightly on his throne; and all this day an unaccustomed spirit lifts me above the ground with cheerful thoughts. I dreamed my lady came and found me dead—strange dream, that gives a dead man leave to think!—and breathed such life with kisses in my lips, that I revived, and was an emperor. Ah me! How sweet is love itself possessed, when but love's shadows are rich in joy!"

"Romeo?"

Romeo turned around at the sound of his name. Standing across the pavilion was Balthasar, a servant from the Montague manor. "How now, Balthasar!" Romeo called, and stood to go meet the man. The two shook hands at the pavilion's center. "Do you bring me news from Verona? Letters from the friar? How fares Juliet? Is my father well? How fares Juliet?; this I ask again, for nothing can be ill, if she be well."

The mist which hung about Mantua congregated at the two glimmering points of Balthasar's eyes. "I saw her laid low in her kindred's vault. Her body sleeps in the monument, and her immortal part now lives with the angels." Balthasar knelt. "A thousand apologies for bringing such ill news."

Romeo staggered back, feeling as though pierced by a dagger. As he spoke, he felt as though he manipulated rubbery lips with his fingers, rattled another body's teeth, pumped a bellows to make wind that was only appearing in the guise of his breath, for at this moment, he was already dead, his spirit merely lingering to puppet the corpse of Romeo for as much time as it would take to secure his grave: "Did you ride here?"

"I did, my lord."

"Did you take one of our steeds?"

"I did."

"Good, there are none swifter. You know of where my lodgings are in this city; get me ink and paper and meet me there. Once I have writ something, we will ride back to Verona."

"I do beseech you sir, have patience. Your looks are pale and wild, and do import some misadventure."

Romeo shook his head. "Leave me, and do the thing I bid thee do. Hast thou no letters to me from the friar?"

"No, my good lord."

Already slain, Romeo felt no pain at someone telling him that the killing dagger had indeed been sharp. "No matter. Get thee gone. I'll be with thee at my lodgings shortly."

Balthasar bowed his head deeply towards Romeo, and then exited into Mantua's perpetual misty rain.

Looking again into the rippling waters, Romeo mused, "Well, Juliet, I will lie with thee tonight. Oh mischief, thou art swift to enter in the thoughts of desperate men. I do remember an apothecary—and hereabouts he dwells."

Romeo turned from the waters and left the pavilion, crossed a park's misty lawn, and began down a decrepit street, the dwellings all packed together, most merely shacks which could be seen over if one stood on their toes. By the door of one such shack, hung up on a string by his tail, was a mummified tortoise. On the ground beneath it, a stuffed alligator, missing both of its eyes and near half of its hide, the stuffing inside damp and illpreserved. Romeo pushed open the door, and stooped to stand in the apothecary's cramped hut.

From across a lopsided counter, the apothecary looked up. He was gaunt and unshaven, a visage of sharp misery. If a man needed poison, this was the man who would sell it.

Nearing the end of his need for currency along with all other earthly possessions, Romeo emptied his pockets of coins, placing them all on the counter. "I see that thou art poor. There's forty ducats: let me have a dram of poison, of such strength that it will disperse itself through all the veins, that the life-weary taker may fall dead, and that the chest may be discharged of breath as violently as hasty powder doth hurry from the fatal cannon's womb."

The apothecary made no motion to take Romeo's payment. Instead he glared, such that Romeo might think that the man wanted him dead; but alas.

"Such mortal drugs I have," the apothecary said, "but Mantua's law is death to any he that utters them."

"Famine is in thy cheeks; need and oppression starves in thine eyes; contempt and beggary hangs upon thy back. The world is not thy friend, nor the world's law, for the

world affords no law to make thee rich. So break this law, and be not poor: take what I offer."

With still no hint of joy, the apothecary slid the coins off of the counter towards himself, into his palm, and stowed the payment below the counter. "My poverty, but not my will, consents."

"I pay thy poverty, and not thy will."

The apothecary went to a back room, and returned with a wooden flask. "When it be your time to depart, drink even a sip of this; and, if you had the strength of twenty men, it would dispatch you in the span of a breath."

From a hidden pocket on his garb, Romeo produced a coin worth all that together which he had already given, and set it on the counter before the apothecary. "There again is thy gold; worse poison to men's souls, doing more murders in this loathsome world, than these poor compounds that thou are forbidden to sell. I sell thee poison: thou hast sold me none. Buy food, get thee well. Come cordial, and not poison: go with me to Juliet's grave; for there must I use thee."

ACT V.

SCENE II.

FRJAR Lawrence embraced Friar John in the doorway of the abbey, proclaiming, "Holy Franciscan friar! Brother, ho there! It is very welcome to have you visit from Mantua. What says Romeo? Or, if his mind be writ, give me his letter."

Friar John sighed, and turned to walk about outside of the abbey, with Friar Lawrence beside. As they walked through the winding rows amidst the garden, Friar John explained, "When I was here last, after you gave me Romeo's letter, I went to seek out another brother here before returning to Mantua. He was visiting the sick. The watch, suspecting that we were both in a house where the infectious pestilence did reign, sealed up the doors, and would not let us forth; so that my speed to Mantua there was stayed. In truth, I have been in Verona and nowhere else since last we spoke. Indeed, you were likely more of a traveler than I was in that time."

"Who bare my letter then, to Romeo?"

"I could not send it—here it is again—nor get a messenger to bring it thee, so fearful were they of infection."

Friar Lawrence clutched at the letter returned to him, staring at it, wishing he could disbelieve that it was here with him, undelivered. "Unhappy fortune! By my brotherhood, the letter was not nice, but full of charge of dear import; and the neglecting of it may do much danger.

Friar John, go hence; get me a crow bar, and bring it straight to my cell."

Friar John nodded. "Brother, I'll go and bring it thee."

As Friar John went, Friar Lawrence paced back and forth over a portion of the garden path. "Now must I go to the monument alone; within this three hours will good Juliet wake: she will beshrew me much that Romeo hath had no notice of these accidents; but I will write again to Mantua, and keep her at my cell till Romeo come; poor living corpse, closed in a dead man's tomb!"

ACT V.

SCENE III.

COUNTY Paris and his younger sister Paige walked beside one another, boots crunching over the gravel path through the graveyard. Paige held a torch, which cut through the dark of the night. County Paris held a bouquet of flowers of a species grown only at the king's castle; black and violet and shaped like a bell, with the mouth coming out to eight waving points like a decorative compass rose. There would be no mistaking who had left them.

"Give me thy torch, Paige."

"I should like to accompany you to pay respects. I met the pup while visiting Mercutio on the day they died."

"Is that so? Well. You may come along, though I mean to be brief tonight. If it please you though, put out your torch so we may be able to keep a watch through the dark night, and not have the near light blind us."

"Very well," Paige said, and paused to snuff out the torch.

When it was out, she and Paris resumed their walk through the graveyard, until arriving at the Capulets' monument, a grand stonework head to the vault below, the heavy stone door recently opened to place Juliet inside, but now since closed.

Paris knelt at the ledge surrounding the monument, and began arranging the flowers along it as Paige stood silently behind, her thoughts for the loving mother and happy spirit whom she had not known long at all, but whom had made a nice impression.

As he arranged the flowers, Paris spoke, "Sweet flower, with flowers thy bed I strew; oh woe, thy canopy is dust and stones—"

Paige gripped Paris's shoulder. "Someone approaches."

Stopping his speech to listen, the County Paris could indeed hear footsteps walking over the gravel. He turned in the direction of the sound. In the distance, coming around a copse of yew trees, a pair of figures lit by torchlight approached, much the same as had he and Paige.

Paris muttered, "What cursed foot wanders this way tonight? Come, Paige, let the night muffle us a while."

Together, the two stole away to hide behind a nearby yew tree, and spy out these other late night visitors from behind its trunks.

The two figures arrived at the Capulets' monument.

"Give me that mattock and the wrenching-iron," Romeo said to Balthasar.

Balthasar did as asked.

Romeo continued, "Hold, take this letter; early in the morning see thou deliver it to my lord and father. Give me the light. Upon thy life, I charge thee, whatever thou hear'st or see'st, keep away and do not interrupt me in my work. Go, be gone; if you do return to pry in what I do here, by heaven, I will tear thee joint by joint, and strew this hungry churchyard with thy limbs. The time and my intents are more fierce than empty tigers or the roaring sea."

By the light of the torch which Romeo now held, Balthasar's face was lit in an expression of grave concern, but he said only, "I will be gone, sir, and not trouble you."

"So shalt thou show me friendship. Take thou that: live, and be prosperous; and farewell, good fellow."

Balthasar departed from the torchlight into the darkness, back up the gravel path. When he was well gone from the light, he turned off the path and went to hide near a hedge, to watch the young lord. To himself, he said,

"For all this same, I'll hide me hereabout: his looks I fear, and his intentions I doubt."

Romeo stood at the stone door of the Capulets' monument. "Thou detestable maw, thou womb of death, gorged with the dearest morsel of the earth; with this, I enforce thy rotten jaws to open, and, in despite, I'll cram thee with more food."

With the tools Balthasar had given, Romeo pried open the stone door, stepped into the monument, and went down the cold stairway to the vault in the earth.

From the yew tree, Paris spoke: "This is that banished haughty Montague that murdered that Capulet Tybalt—with which grief, it is supposed, the good Juliet died. And here this Montague comes to do some villainous shame to the dead bodies: I will apprehend him."

"He is her husband, Paris," Paige said, holding her brother back by the arm. "By blessing bestowed by Escalus, he is the father of her litter. I assure you, he only comes to pay respects as we have."

"You add to his abominations by the syllable," Paris said, and disengaged from Paige's hand, and marched forth.

Left by herself, Paige sighed nervously.

"Vile Montague!" Paris called, as he marched into the monument and down the stone steps. At the bottom of the stairs was a long chamber, halfway into which stood Romeo with a torch, who turned to face the approaching royal.

"County Paris?"

"Can vengeance be pursued further than death? Condemned villain, I do apprehend thee: obey, and go with me, for thou must die."

"I must indeed," Romeo wholeheartedly agreed. "And therefor I came hither. Good gentle youth, tempt not a desperate man; fly hence, and leave me: think upon these departed souls and let them frighten thee. I beseech thee, please, put not another sin upon my head by urging me to

fury so close to my mortal journey's end. By heaven, I love thee better than myself, for I come hither armed only against myself. Stay not, be gone; live, and hereafter say, a madman's mercy bid thee run away."

Paris drew his sabre. "I do defy thy ramblings, and apprehend thee for a criminal here."

Romeo gnarled his hands. "If thou wilt provoke me, toss me thy dagger so that I am armed, and the law be on your side in this scrap."

Paris unsheathed his dagger, knelt, and slid it across the stone floor to the young Montague lord. The lord stood with the dagger as he had stood before, torch still in his off hand, employing no fighting stance, no light footwork.

Standing at a narrow-profiled fencing stance, Paris advanced, retreated, advanced, and made a lunge. Romeo knocked aside the county's blade with the torch and took a step forward to stab the county into the front of the throat with the dagger, such that it went through and severed the county's spine. The royal collapsed, instantly dead. Romeo sighed, and turned again to face deeper into the vault. At the end of the long hall, atop a stone bed, lay the body of Juliet, mother of all Great Danes, wife of the widowed lord who now approached.

Romeo knelt before her, and laid a gentle hand on her still side.

"Oh my love; oh my wife. Death, that hath sucked the honey of thy breath, hath no power yet upon thy beauty: thou art not conquered." Romeo gently brushed back one of her ears, and ran a careful thumb over the skin, yet flush instead of pale, even though Juliet did not breathe. "Death's pale flag has not advanced on thee. Shall I believe that Death is amorous? That that lean abhorred monster keeps thee here in the dark to be his paramour? For fear of that, I still will stay with thee, and never from this palace of dim night depart again; here will I remain with worms that are thy chamber-maids; oh, here will I set up my everlasting rest, and shake the yoke of inauspicious fate

from this world-wearied flesh. Eyes, look your last! Arms, take your last embrace! And lips, oh you the doors of breath, seal with a righteous kiss this eternal slumber; let it be as good as the morning you and I first awoke as husband and wife, our breath as one, ourselves never to part." Romeo opened the apothecary's flask, tilted back his head, and drank. Immediately, a cold and tingling drowsiness spread to every inch of his body, head to toe, fingertip to fingertip. Laying himself to rest face to face with Juliet, Romeo spoke his last: "Oh, true apothecary. Thy drugs are quick. Thus, with a kiss, I die."

Romeo pressed his lips to his wife's. Face to face, lip to lip, hand resting on her side, paw resting on his neck, as so often they were found together in life, Romeo in his wife's embrace died.

From her slumber of impersonated death, Juliet awoke entwined with Romeo. Without so much as lifting her head, Juliet kissed her husband, licking the poison from inside of his mouth, and followed swiftly after him unto eternity.