**Supernovas and Fallen Stars**

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**Supernovas and Fallen Stars**

*by* [Penguin_Lord](http://archiveofourown.org/users/Penguin_Lord)

**Summary**

The night of the Capulet Masquerade Benvolio made a split-second decision. He distracted Tybalt from his cousin Romeo by asking the famed King of Cats to a dance. That single moment would have far reaching repercussions, the least of which being Tybalt's absolute refusal to leave him bloody well alone.
Benvolio of the House Montague surveyed the party, completely uncomfortable with the situation at hand. Mercutio’s overzealous adrenaline addiction had never landed him in a worse situation than this. The Capulet Compound, the heart of enemy territory. That was where he was right now. Alone in a den of wolves except for his cousin and their rambunctious friend.

Mercutio thought it was worth it, to cheer Romeo out of his love-struck ways. Benvolio knew better. Romeo who fell in and out of love as a weather-vane turned in the wind. Romeo who even now was finding some new fancy, some new femme fatale to love with the ferocity of a supernova. That was what Romeo was; bright, sharp, fiery, almost violent was the strength of his will.

Benvolio lived in the shadows by contrast.

Which is why he would protect his cousin with every fibre of his being. Romeo had a supernova’s lifespan too, bright but brief, sharp but swift, fiery but fierce, savage in its destruction of its own self.

So when Benvolio caught sight of Tybalt, equally ferocious but with a sharp cruelty, marching across the dance floor towards Romeo with vengeance in his eyes, he knew he had to interrupt. It was well within Tybalt’s rights to demand reparation, since Romeo, Mercutio and Benvolio were trespassing on the Capulet’s evening, but Benvolio hoped against hope that he could stop the scene of violence before it could start.

New music thrummed as the musicians switched to a slow waltz. Using it to his advantage, Benvolio swiftly intercepted Tybalt’s forceful and up until then, encumbered, stride across the room to better accost Romeo.

“Sir Tybalt,” Benvolio asserted himself into Tybalt’s path. “Might I have the honor of this dance?”

Tybalt stopped dead, turning his venomous gaze on a new target.

And the world halted.

Benvolio felt stripped bare, naked. Everything that was Benvolio was deconstructed and analyzed down to the tiniest of proportions. Tybalt’s harsh glare pinned him, like a butterfly stuck on a
scientific dartboard, sterile, unfeeling.

The world resumed. With one terrifying result.

Tybalt smiled. Not a nice smile, no, but one accompanied by a cruel twist of the mouth, a dark glimmer of the eye.

Tybalt’s voice was sickly sweet, a cunning and sly tone that brought shivers down Benvolio’s spine. “You honor me, young Montague. Of course I would be more than happy to dance with you.”

It was at that moment that Benvolio knew he was absolutely fucked.

Tybalt did not let go. The first waltz turned into two, then three, and by the time the fourth dance started, Tybalt had proceeded to pull Benvolio even closer to him.

He never lost that unnerving smirk that Benvolio distrusted either.

“Well, young Montague, how are you enjoying my family’s party?”

Benvolio looked up, startled. This was the first time Tybalt had addressed him since agreeing to the original dance.

“It is a marvelous party, sir,” Benvolio demurred. He tried again to break the hold of Tybalt’s iron grip with no success.

Tybalt chuckled low in his throat. “Now, now, after all the effort you took to get me to dance, you want to leave now? How rude.”

“I apologize,” Benvolio straightened. “But common courtesy demands that individuals not dance more than two dances with the same partner. I believe I have overstayed my welcome. So if you will excuse me…” He broke away as the song ended, swiftly sidestepping Tybalt’s attempt to grab his hand.

“Not so fast, Montague,” Tybalt’s hand struck, quick and deadly as a viper. Benvolio halted as Tybalt’s hand grabbed him by the back of his neck; a deceptively tender gesture to hide the tempered steel intent. “I believe that as host, my rules void the expectations of common courtesy. Not to mention sneaking in when you weren’t invited completely shatters those ‘oh-so-important’ values. You and I will dance however long I would like us to. And once I release you, you will politely thank me for the dance. Agreed?”

Benvolio tried to escape without drawing attention to himself. It was helpless. They were caught in the middle of the dance floor; already pairs started the next set, an uplifting, jaunty line dance.

“I’d hate to have to forcibly evict you and your friends, Benvolio,” Benvolio shivered. This was the first time Tybalt had used his name instead of just ‘Montague’. “Think of the reparations my uncle could demand, since you so rudely disrupted our party.”

Tybalt raised his eyebrows, mouth still quirked in a cruel line.

Benvolio risked a glance back at Romeo. His cousin was burning brightly now, face alight like it hadn’t been in a long time.

“Alright, Tybalt.” You win, Benvolio thought to himself.

By Tybalt’s facial expression, he caught the unsaid concession. His smirk returned full force,
viciously triumphant.

“Come now, dear Benvolio, our next dance awaits.”

Tybalt reclaimed his tight grip, sweeping the younger man off to join the line of dancers.

Because it was a line dance, Tybalt was forced to let go, though the lingering tingle of a tight squeeze around Benvolio’s arm served as a potent reminder of Tybalt’s previous words. Benvolio breathed a sigh of relief, but dutifully continued to accept and pass on the circling temporary partners. He again chanced a wandering glance off the dance floor, this time looking for Mercutio.

Mercutio was nowhere to be found.

All too soon Benvolio found himself back in Tybalt’s arms, casually carried off the dance floor. Unable to protest, Benvolio reluctantly allowed Tybalt to lead him up to the dias where Lord Capulet held court for the night. Somber and solemn, the elders of the Capulet Family eyed Benvolio the way they would an injured lion: dangerous but weakened, unpredictable, better to kill now in this moment of frailty then let the accursed thing live a moment longer.

Except the Lord Capulet himself. He studied Benvolio and Tybalt with a politician’s eye, seeing the negatives and the positives and trying to benefit from both.

“Well now my nephew, what an unusual guest you have brought to my table,” he greeted Benvolio with a magnanimous nod, far more generous than an interloper like Benvolio deserved.

“Lord Capulet,” Benvolio managed a polite bow, determined not to fail his heritage. But he stopped, unsure of how to phrase his next few words. As a trespasser, any vocabulary in thanks of welcome would be insulting at best, abusive at worst.

“Thank you for your kind treatment after our unwelcome entrance.” Finally deciding frank honesty was the best option, Benvolio was gratified when Lord Capulet chuckled heartily at his words.

“That is putting it mildly, young Montague. Though I must thank you for dragging Tybalt out on the dance floor. Normally it is so hard to force him to accept even one dance,” Lord Capulet murmured the last bit, as though a humorous secret shared between friends.

Tybalt tightened his grip on Benvolio’s waist to stop Benvolio from saying any more.

“Yes my uncle, but never have I had such an interesting partner as young Benvolio. And so brave, to ask me to dance. Why, I think this must be a record.”

The surrounding men chuckled lowly, their gazes losing that malicious edge but still just as wary.

“After that, I had to bring him over here to meet you, isn’t that right, dear?” Tybalt asked Benvolio, that cruel tone returning to his words. Everyone heard it, heard the sharp, cutting sarcasm aimed at the outsider in their midst. Mercutio had called Tybalt the ‘King of Cats’ in jest, but at this moment Benvolio felt ever the helpless prey of the hungry tiger, whose roving eyes followed every move he tried to make.

Benvolio looked down, admitting defeat once again. He was caught, caught in this web of Mercutio’s prideful ideas and his own stupidity.

A hand cupped his chin and forced him to look up into the face of Lord Capulet. “Take heart, young Benvolio. You may have lost the battle, but the war is life long. We have all courted follies in our youths. Tybalt beat you fair and square, correct?”
“Yes, Lord Capulet,” the younger man admitted with a rueful nod.

“Good, good. And you learned something?”

“Absolutely, Lord Capulet,” a bit more enthusiasm here.

“Excellent. Well, now, I think it would behoove you and your kinsmen to exit gracefully at this juncture, whilst the opportunity presents itself. I trust I will not see you here again?” Steel once again tempered the Lord Capulet’s words, reminding Benvolio that no matter how light-hearted the conversation seemed, a war could have just as easily been started.

“No, Lord Capulet.”

Benvolio gracefully shimmied out of Tybalt’s grasp. He bowed low to the Lord Capulet, once more to the surrounding court and then nodded his head at Tybalt.

“Thank you for the learning experience, sir Tybalt.”

With that, he fled.

“What are you planning, nephew?”

“Nothing, uncle.”

Silence.

“I do not believe you.”

“I would be hurt if you had.”

Benvolio bid a hasty retreat from the Lord Capulet’s dias, fighting down a rising swell of panic. He scanned the room, noting Romeo firmly ensconced in the bosom of a new lady love and Mercutio’s position near the windows.

Praying to whatever god would hear him, he accosted Mercutio first.

“Mercutio, friend, I fear we have overstayed our welcome. It is best we make haste while they are still tolerant of our trespasses.”

“And how would you know that, friend?” Mercutio turned around to face him. Hands, white with fury, clenched the thick base of Mercutio’s cup, straining and straining, the sole output of his furious and deadly temper. “I saw that Tybalt was all too tolerant of your overtures on the dance floor.”

“It is not as it appears, Mercutio,” Benvolio tried to sooth.

“No, it never is. And I might be willing to believe you had you not eagerly followed him to meet with Lord Capulet, our solemn enemy. Like a puppy you were, happy with a wagging tail to fall into the enemy’s embrace.”

Heads were turning in their direction.

“Mercutio please,” Benvolio entreated.

Sensing the change in the atmosphere, Mercutio reluctantly agreed. “Very well, but we will revisit
this topic of conversation on a later date. Besides the party is withering. Where is our Romeo?”

Romeo’s lady friend had deserted him, leaving in her place a poor substitute, in Benvolio’s opinion. An older lady of some standing stood conversing with Romeo and Benvolio was alarmed to note he recognized the lady. It was the nurse of Lady Juliet, Lord Capulet’s only daughter.

Oh dear. This was going to end very badly.

“How now Romeo?” Benvolio was determined to distract Mercutio before he could jump to the same conclusion about Romeo’s unlikely companion. “What’s say you that we avail ourselves the excellent opportunity to make a unencumbered exit?”

“Good cousin and friend,” Romeo cried, addressing both of them. The nurse took the opportunity to slip away.

“Romeo,” Mercutio greeted, his jesting tone covering the the unrest of earlier. “I see you have made acquaintances of many handsome women. Tell me, have you found anyone lovely enough to overshadow the buxom Roseline?”

Romeo, distracted by the nurse’s quick departure, kept half his focus on the conversation. “Aye, one as lovely as ever I have seen before.”

“Come Romeo, tell us of your lady love as we walk. The party is waning and it is best not to prey on our hosts’ good will any longer than necessary,” Benvolio steered his two companions out of the hall, across the flagstone courtyard and through the large, reinforced wooden doors of the entrance gate. He released a large breath as they turned right onto the cobblestone lane outside the formidable residence, an invisible weight lifting off his shoulders.

They had escaped. But what tomorrow would bring was another matter entirely.

Chapter End Notes

The idea for the story sprang into my mind some years ago, during 9th grade English class when we were forced into a unit on Romeo and Juliet. Not my favorite Shakespeare play, but I instantly fell in love with Benvolio's character. I tweaked a couple events in my head and suddenly this idea would not leave me alone. It took over six years for me to begin typing it all out (though there were several paper drafts before). The final story took about two and a half years to actually coalesce into a mostly complete first draft. As this is mostly complete, I've decided to start posting the first couple chapters.

I was originally attempting a short novella, hopefully about 10,000 words. That did not happen. This monstrosity is now comfortably sitting at 50,000 words, with more probably to come as I go back and revamp later chapters.

That being said, I would love a beta or two, if anyone is interested.

These earlier parts were also posted to tumblr, under the name shprintzel, which is a side blog I have. Updates have been made since that draft.

This story is a labor of love by me. I'm quite emotionally attached to it which is probably
the reason it took me so long to post it. But I was hoping there would be other people out there who would enjoy it as well. Thanks for reading.
The Day After

Chapter Notes

As I stated before, this is not completely accurate to the play. I changed some of the dialogue, though the intent is the same.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Tomorrow dawned bright and early and completely unwelcome.

The air was thick, stagnant, those moments building before the thunderstorm, waiting for the world to change. Romeo’s words from last night, of prophecy and fate, ill-luck and feuds came haunting in his dreams. Mercutio’s betrayed stare, Tybalt’s cruel smile, and Lord Capulet’s pointed warning, all sped round and round his memory, circling like vultures lured by the smell of blood, the smell of weakness, the smell of death.

Somehow Benvolio knew this had to do with Romeo’s sudden disappearance last night. Too close to the Capulet Compound to be a coincidence, it was a sign that things, emotions, people, a revolution was stirring.

That foreboding feeling was only made worse as the morning progressed. The servant gossip chain expressed that Romeo had been out all night. He had not set one foot into the Montague house since last night before the party.

More ill news followed.

“Master Benvolio,” one of the servant girls approached him as he walked along a sunlit hallway, intending to break his fast in the kitchen. “Two letters came just now, one for you and one for Master Romeo.”

She held them out expectantly and Benvolio removed them from her possession with gracious thanks.

His heart sank as he swiftly opened the letter addressed to himself.

‘Benvolio,

I thoroughly enjoyed our dance last night.

Tybalt’

Simple. Elegant. Deadly. Those words, this letter was not the innocent pleasantry it masqueraded as. This was taunt, a harsh jab.

Benvolio was all too reminded of Mercutio’s betrayed stare as they walked through the meandering alleyways back to the Montague compound after failing to find Romeo after the party. He had tried to explain, laying out the whole affair, brief but powerful as it was. Mercutio had walked in silence for a minute before finally responding.

“And what is Tybalt’s master plan? Why keep you by his side, noticeable, seen by all?”
“I know not.” Thankful that Mercutio had believed him, Benvolio offloaded all the thoughts swimming around his head. “It must be a jab at my family, though I can think of no way this directly harms the Montagues.”

“Unless word got out that Tybalt was dancing willingly with you all night.”

“It was a Masquerade. If the general populace of the party had known who we were, there might well have been a riot on our hands. Tybalt and Lord Capulet only knew who I was because I am assuming someone from their guards alerted them to our presence.”

“And then you went out of your way to interact with them.” A harsh dig into an already sore area but at least it lacked the desperate betrayal that had been present last night.

“I told you, I -”

“Had no choice, yes I remember. I apologize, good Benvolio. But I still find it more than a mite unbelievable that Tybalt would willingly dance with any enemy for that long, no matter how fetching.”

Benvolio sighed. Again. Refusing to take the bait, he continued, “Yes, as you’ve already said. Forgive me if I refuse to reestablish the finer points we’ve already made. And you’ll forgive me again, Mercutio, if I say that this conversation is pointlessly cyclical and frankly, a waste of my time. I would much rather be spending my time trying to find my dear cousin, who seems to have run off into the night.”

Mercutio stared at him balefully for another few moments before reluctantly agreeing.

In the end though they never found Romeo. Benvolio had conceded defeat when the bells in the cathedral signaled the hour was past the second hour of the new day.

He silently shook himself out of reminiscence. All the worries of last night returned this morning, just as vibrant as before. And they brought friends.

Deciding that any more effort spent at this juncture would be pointless, Benvolio returned to his voyage to break his fast. After a simple meal of fruits and breads, he went out into the city, determined to finally locate his missing cousin.

Fortune was against him that morning. Romeo was nowhere to be found. Mercutio caught up with him just past the market square and related a negative result on his end as well.

Benvolio relayed the deliverance of the missive to Romeo, neglecting to mention the second letter addressed to himself.

“Well?” Mercutio demanded hotly, all angry steam and fire, like a pot about to boil over.

“Well what?”

“What demands does that foul Capulet make of Romeo? How many slanders hath he wrought on the Montague’s good name? Has he issued a challenge?”

“I know not.”

“What do you mean you don’t know? Did you not read it?” Mercutio halted his fervid pacing to stare at Benvolio in disbelief.
“Nay, I did not.”

“Why not?”

“Why not?” As if the answer wasn’t obvious. “It is Romeo’s personal letter. I would never read someone else’s letters without permission.”

“You may not, but I certainly would,” Mercutio agreed solemnly but with a hint of mischief returning to his eyes. Suddenly, he pounced. “Where is it? Give it to me, Benvolio!”

It was more a tickle attack than a legitimate assault on his person. Benvolio gasped with laughter, huffing with the effort of trying to keep other, more embarrassing high pitched noises in (he would deny to his the first sound that came out of his mouth was a fairly high pitched squeak of shock).

Mercutio rifled through his belt pouches. Finding nothing, he moved onto the interior of Benvolio’s tunic. Crowing in triumph he pulled out not one but two pieces of paper.

Benvolio suddenly froze, his stomach turning to ice. In his haste to find Romeo, he had forgotten to get rid of Tybalt’s letter to him.

“What’s this?” Mercutio asked, mainly to himself. “Two letters. One addressed to Romeo. The other to you, Benvolio.”

The ‘care to explain’ at the end of that sentence was left unspoken, but Benvolio heart it all the same crystal clear.

“It is nothing,” Benvolio tried to explain. “A simple missive, one more of Tybalt’s tricks.”

“I thoroughly enjoyed our dance last night’?” Mercutio read what was on the note with a serenity that was most alarming.

“Never mind that now,” Benvolio said quickly. “What does Romeo’s note say?”

“Hm, so eager now. What happened to ‘I would never read someone else’s letters without permission?’”

“Hush now,” choosing to huff at the teasing, the younger Montague stared at the Prince’s kin with a displeased expression.

Mercutio chuffed. “Come now, do not turn that pout on me.”

Benvolio continued to stare, adding some lower lip action to make his facial expression even more pitiful. It was an old game they played, one that Romeo and Mercutio had still yet to build up immunity to.

“Very well.” Mercutio folded by opening up Romeo’s letter.

“Romeo, of the House Montague,”” Mercutio reads. “‘Last night you and your friend made unwanted overtures…. yada yada yada…. disgrace of our masquerade, demand reparations…. duel to the death…. honor is at stake.’ It sounds like what one might expect from sir Tybalt, King of Cats,” Mercutio jested.

In Benvolio’s mind arose images of a cruel smile, a tight grip, and serious, solemn eyes. He saw a tiger stalking its prey with all the assuredness and confidence of King presiding over his court.

“Please do not call him that,” Benvolio urged.
Mercutio raised an eyebrow but thankfully did not comment.

“It sounds to me like your Tybalt is challenging our dear Romeo in a duel of honor.”

Benvolio thought about attempting to defend himself, that Tybalt was not ‘his’ or anyone else’s, but decided to give up that fight.

“Rosaline!” Mercutio non sequitured loudly, extremely pleased with himself for having solved that problem. “That’s where Romeo is. He is still tangled in her spider’s web, shot dead by Cupid’s arrow.”

Benvolio was sure Romeo had been affected by Cupid’s arrow, but he was not as positive that Rosaline had been the other recipient.

They spent a fruitless hour searching for their wayward compatriot, only for him to reappear of his own volition in the Santa Maria square. Benvolio’s fears compounded with his preoccupation with Juliet’s nurse in the square. His disappearance later just made things worse. Though still suspicious of Tybalt’s behaviour and letters, Mercutio softened over the course of the morning back into the headstrong but compassionate idiot of a friend that Benvolio had always known.

They eventually went in opposite directions. Benvolio left to peruse some of his favorite book stalls; Mercutio made a remark about a current wench he was trying to woo and took off towards her presumed location. They vowed to meet at third afternoon bell in the western market, a lively series of streets that held all manner of fruits and produce. Their cobbled windy curves held tens of stalls, every vendor battering, clamoring, yelling, and cajoling for new customers.

Benvolio, a well practiced denizen of Verona, arrived early and adeptly avoided even the most deft salesmen and women with a polite air.

Mercutio was to be found near the apple seller and they exchanged a casual greeting.

“Good morrow, good Mercutio.”

“And same to you, Benvolio. But where is your cousin?”

“Still sick with love for the beautiful Rosaline.” Benvolio figured it was best to keep up the act that Romeo was caught on Rosaline.

“Poor Romeo. If this keeps up, we will have to call the stone carver and have him fashion a tombstone for when Romeo eventually dies of love sickness. The epithet will read ‘Here lies Romeo of the Montagues. Dead from an excess of love and not enough release, struck by an arrow of Cupid that could not find its quiver.’”

Benvolio burst out laughing at the double entendre.

Mercutio kept tossing out even more and more lurid jokes as they passed through the market, scandalizing some of the more conservative members of community when he proclaimed Romeo’s instrument faulty from lack of use and made some very lurid suggestions with his hands about what Rosaline should do to help him clean it.

Eventually they turned left past a stall that sold flowers and into an open square, one of many scattered among Verona’s streets. More stalls crowded along the periphery, while the middle of the square was defined by a fountain, populated by pigeons and washerwomen.
A few of his fellow kinsmen were already gathered on the north side of the fountain and Mercutio eagerly colluded with the other Montagues, replicating the lurid hand gestures for their amusement. Shouts of laughter increased as the conversation devolved into a competition of who had the dirtiest mind.

Benvolio was beginning to really enjoy himself, laughing full force as Mercutio parodied in flagrante delicto with Abram’s dagger, when a stern, harsh voice cut through the air.

“What noise is this? What cur and scoundrel thus makes mockery of the peaceful streets of Verona?”

Tybalt Capulet and a full contingent of his kinsmen had entered unnoticed from the south end of the market square.

“Well, now. Montagues. I should have known. Filthy, disgusting, inbred half-wits who do not know any better because they were raised in a pigsty.” Tybalt spoke loudly to the whole street.

The Montagues closed ranks, their good humored bantering transforming into angry growls. Tybalt either did not notice or did not care for he continued just as loudly. “But good. I have a desire to speak with one of you. Where is that villain Romeo, he who dared to make derision of my family’s party two nights since? I have sent him an intent to duel. Come on now. Produce him. Honor must be satisfied.”

Chapter End Notes

If anyone is interested in being a beta, I would welcome any and all help.

Just to clarify on my view of character ages:
Romeo: 18
Benvolio: 17
Juliet: Almost 14
Tybalt: 24
Paris: 26
Mercutio: Not specified, but I've always assumed 20
The Fight

Chapter Notes

I've posted this a little early, because I felt like it. I'm glad that people are enjoying my story. There is not really a set update schedule but I'm trying to do at least once a week.

In the end, nothing Benvolio said or did changed the outcome of the fight. He only made the situation worse for himself.

It started out as Benvolio had predicted it would. Tybalt made good on his promises in the letter, demanding, for the whole world to hear, reparations for the damage done by Romeo and his friend’s unwanted trespasses at the Capulet masquerade two nights past.

The square was alight with tension, each side’s forces quickly assembling once word was spread of the impending melee. Romeo entered at the worst possible moment, when a single spark would set even the whole sky aflame.

Romeo, to everyone’s shock (except Benvolio’s), declined the duel with apparent insanity. His pronouncements about kin and family were taken with many muttered questions and confused, rigid stares. Neither side was eager to look too far into that claim, but it was all forgotten in a moment, when Mercutio leapt up in Romeo’s place. With dramatic flare, Mercutio defended Romeo and ignited a whole new battle, one Tybalt was more than happy to oblige.

Now each side was cheering, loud and reverberant in the enclosed square. Insults and profanities were yelled, aired in the harsh mid-morning light. They encircled the duelers, no one daring to break the spell of destruction wrought by the frenzied parries and lunges of solid steel. The King of Cats faced off against noble Mercutio neither willing to back down an inch. If Tybalt was the sleek and dangerous tiger, then Mercutio was a charging rhino, made of power and blunt fury.

“Mercutio, put down your rapier!” Romeo tried to argue with his friend. “The Prince has forbid us from brawling in the streets.”

“You’ll get us all exiled,” Benvolio tried to add.

Neither fighter obeyed or even seemed to register their commands. Their swords flashed more violently. Inexplicably, the crowd quieted, all holding their breath for the moment when fate spoke.

When Romeo stepped out in front of the fighters, Benvolio’s whole world frozen.

Then, before fate could make up her mind and set the whole world ablaze, Benvolio too joined his cousin in the center of the circle.

Silence.

That was all that could describe the moment. Sudden silence, except for the harsh breathing of the two duelists. Both had rapiers raised, Mercutio about to lunge, Tybalt’s to parry. The crowd waited behind an invisible boundary defined by common surprise and common insults.

As Romeo automatically placed himself in front of Mercutio, so too did Benvolio mirror with Tybalt.
“Peace, friend,” Romeo tried to calm Mercutio. “Peace.”

But Mercutio would not hear of peace. With an astounding roar, he shouted at Benvolio, “Traitor!”

“Mercutio, please,” Benvolio started but was overruled again.

“Filthy, villainous traitor! A plague upon you Benvolio for turning traitor to your own house, to your family, for this hell-hated scum!” Mercutio screamed at the top of his lungs, a veritable banshee, heard all around the square.

Here all the murmurs returned, but this time they were aimed at Benvolio instead. His stomach turned to ashes, his breaths coming in harsh pants.

“It is not as it seems,” Benvolio tried to plead.

“The hell it isn’t,” Mercutio marched past Romeo, who stood dumbfounded, mouth agape at this new turn of events. “Thou poisonous knave, thou reeky, scale-sided turncoat. Try to deny what I know to be the truth.”

The foul tempered cousin to the Prince continued to advance, holding his sword against the unarmed Montague.

“Mercutio,” Romeo had reclaimed some of his wits, and now approached from behind the fuming combatant. “You cannot honestly think that Benvolio would—”

“You have not been here Romeo,” Mercutio said to him. “It grieves me to tell you this but your cousin is a traitor. No other word can be so apt. I know not when their liaisons started, but it all came to a head the night of the dance. Benvolio was presented to the Lord of the Capulets, the chief among our enemies, and accepted by him. I saw them together, smiling, an old friend welcoming a new bride to the family.”

Mercutio’s smile turned spiteful and Benvolio shivered as he was reminded of Tybalt’s mischievously cruel smile the night of the masquerade.

“Don’t deny it,” Mercutio addressed Tybalt now. “I have more evidence if you would care to hear it.”

Tybalt did not appear phased, for all the falsities Mercutio spouted for the world to hear. “I may or may not deny it if I so wish. It is my prerogative.”

Benvolio’s heart sank at the cryptic answer.

“I would like to deny it,” Benvolio’s voice was low and controlled. He knew no amount of shouting would do any good to calm Mercutio’s fiery temper.

“I thought you might,” Mercutio sneered.

“I tried to explain to you the night of the masquerade. This is all a plot.” Calm. Anxious but trying to be serene.


“It is true.” Desperate now. “Please Mercutio, listen to me.”

“I care nothing for traitors, for Capulet whores.”
Dead silence as Benvolio felt his heart breaking. Mercutio had always been one of his dearest friends. Along with Romeo, they went everywhere together, coupled and inseparable like Juno’s swans. The silent weight of the square’s judging stare beat down upon him. Benvolio would not be surprised if he was exiled from the House Montague once word of reached his uncle.

Mercutio’s sword had been edging closer and closer to Benvolio’s jugular as the tension mounted.

“Do it then, if I’m just a traitor to you,” Benvolio dared, speaking now to the rapier that was so close to his vulnerable flesh.

“I think that would be my cue to cut in,” Tybalt’s low voice called as he smoothly inserted himself between Benvolio and the formidable weapon.

“Protecting your property, then?” Mercutio groused. “Very well. Let us resume our duel.”

“It would be my pleasure,” Tybalt brought his sword up to ready position.

And they were off again, the clang of steel on steel resonating in the strangely quiet square.

Property was he? The indignity and unfairness of this hit Benvolio fair in the face. By the time this was over, the Montagues would think of him as a traitor and the Capulet’s would think of him as nothing but cattle, a whore, a piece of property for Tybalt to dispose of as he wished.

“We must separate them,” Romeo snuck up behind Benvolio, surprising him out of his morbid thoughts.

“Romeo, you know I would never-” Benvolio started.

“Peace, cousin,” Romeo soothed. “I know. I know. But there is no time to dwell; the Prince should be here any moment.”

Reminded of the new law and its harsh penalty, Benvolio gazed around in helplessness at the spectacle they were making.

“We’ll all be hanged.” He moaned.

“Nothing so dire, cousin,” Romeo winked playfully. “But you had better help me separate Tybalt and Mercutio. We’ll go on three?”

“Aye,” the younger Montague nodded.

“One. Two. Three,” Romeo and Benvolio both rushed out, again interrupting the fearsome fight between the two skilled duelists.

“Tybalt, Mercutio, stop!” Romeo yelled. “The Prince is sure to arrive soon. He will have us all exiled. Banish’d! Think, damn you!”

Benvolio had successfully gotten in front of Tybalt, halting the elder man with a parry by one of the daggers Benvolio kept strapped to his belt.

Romeo was not having the same luck with the Prince’s own cousin. Mercutio dodged past Romeo’s urging hands, blind with rage and bloodlust. He aimed for Tybalt, never seeing Benvolio in the way, having his own fight with the King of Cats.

One solid thrust and the disquieting impact it made as steel sunk into flesh snapped Mercutio out of his haze of bloodlust.
To his surprise he saw that his sword had not stabbed the enemy Capulet.

His enemy was unharmed, panting and sweaty, but unmarred and uninjured.

Mercutio looked and to his horror say that his own blade was thrust into Benvolio’s left side, blood already dripping down the blade, pooling in the cobblestones. He instinctively pulled his blade back. It made a sickening squelch as it came free from from Benvolio’s body. The younger Montague collapsed artlessly, a puppet whose strings had been cut.

“Benvolio!” Romeo screamed.

Sound resumed. Everyone was talking now, murmuring, shouting, spouting, clamoring, until absolute pandemonium erupted when the sound of horse’s hooves was heard, clattered against the cobblestone.

“The Prince!” Someone yelled. People fled, desperate not to be banished. Tybalt vanished into the crowd. Mercutio stood stone still, gazing at his sword and its blood red blade in apparent confusion.

Amidst it all, Benvolio lay bleeding on the ground, his cousin cradling him. Romeo examined the wound with a panicked eye. “It is not deep, but it is serious.”

Benvolio eyed him with a half-lidded gaze. “We must get to Friar Laurence. He will help.”

“You cannot walk,” Romeo protested.

“I must,” Benvolio argued. With Romeo’s help, he staggered to his feet, nearly keeling over again until Romeo acted as an anchor. “It is not far.”

Together they limped down a narrow alley and through a hidden cranny, scarcely missing the Prince’s swift justice.

Nothing much made it past the fog in Benvolio’s mind the last hundred meters or so from the entrance to the cell where Friar Laurence inhabited. He knew Romeo all but carried him up to the door, that the kind Friar accepted then in, but after that his world was overrun by touch only, the pain blocking out his other senses.

Someone cut his shirt off and cleaned his chest. Even those tiny movement hurt, sending new flames of agony up his spine.

A goblet of wine was pressed against his lips and he obeyed the distant command to drink it. The injured Montague felt its effects slowly. His whole body went fuzzy, the pain finally leaving him, chased away by the potent spirits.

Sure hands stitched his side, those pinpricks of the needle joining the throbbing ache.

A voice urged him to sleep. He attempted to keep his eyes open, knowing there would be questions and conversations that surely he would want to attend. His input would be needed.

But he was foiled when his eyes closed of their own accord and he felt himself drifting off into dreamland.

Romeo saw the events more clearly than his injured cousin. He was ever so thankful that Friar Lawrence chose to aid them, barely glancing at the blood soaking Benvolio’s chest before he herded
the two cousins into the infirmary. Romeo laid Benvolio on an empty cot.

“Quick, Romeo, fetch me the herbs from the shelf to your left,” the father entreated once Romeo is removed of his injured cousin. Romeo rushed to grab the two bottles of herbs while the elder man opened a drawer to fetch bandages, a needle and thread.

“How long ago did he receive this wound?”

“No more than a half hour thence,” Romeo confided.

“Can you clean the wound?” The Friar nodded to a bowl of clean water on the bedside table and some adjoining rags.

“Of course,” Romeo took the rags and dipped them in water. He turned back to his cousin but realized he put the horse before the cart. He had forgotten to remove Benvolio’s shirt. The blood had soaked nearly the entire lower half of the once pristine white shirt, creating an ugly, potent reminder of the events that had just transpired.

Romeo set down the bowl. Carefully he tried pulling on the shirt, extra cautious of upsetting his wounded kin.

As delicate as his touches were, Benvolio still moaned in pain.

“No luck, lad,” Friar Laurence came up behind him, after finishing mixing the herbs together with mortar and pestle. “You’ll have to cut the shirt off.”

Benvolio’s own daggers became the instrument with which that action was performed. They sliced through the fabric, exposing the harsh gaping wound to the light of day.

“Oh, Benvolio,” Romeo groaned. “What grievous injuries they dealt to you. I swear, I will make both of them pay.” He fumbled to make up lost time, reclaiming the bowl from the side table. Taking a breath, the elder Montague worked to calm himself down before he tried to aid his cousin. Clumsy fingers would do no good in a situation like this.

Romeo’s hands returned, this time slow and steady as they cleaned off the blood from Benvolio’s would. Each whimper Benvolio made resounded harshly in the deathly silent infirmary. Once that was done, Romeo retreated, allowing the Friar to take his place. The Friar meanwhile had retrieved two goblets and bottle for wine from a nearby shelf. Pouring a healthy dose of the strong red wine into one goblet, he lifted it gently to Benvolio’s lips.

“Drink this.” Benvolio opened his mouth, consuming the wine with small gulps.

“Good lad,” The Friar encourage Benvolio. “Romeo, hand me that mortar please.”

Romeo complied and then watched as the medicinal paste was applied on Benvolio’s wound. “This should help the wound heal quicker,” Friar Laurence assure him.

Exchanging the mortar with the needle and thread, the Friar’s quick, sure hands expertly stitched and bound the wound.

Once the wound was wrapped and dressed completely, Romeo let out a relieved breath.

“Sleep Benvolio.” The healer commanded to his patient. Benvolio was either too tired to protest or all too happy to comply because after that he drifted off, his chest rising and falling at a constant rate. The lines smoothed on his face, his muscles relaxing from the much needed rest.
Benvolio still looked pale and tragic, his skin harshly contrasting against the white bedsheets, a fallen star cast from the heavens.

Friar Laurence motioned to step outside and together they left the solemn infirmary.

“He will recover,” answering the unspoken question, the Friar led the way into open herb garden, its bright sunshine a stark contrast from the dreary interior. “It may take some time, but the wound did not go deep.”

Romeo felt something inside him slacken, a knot he did not even know existed unknotted. “Thank the Gods.”

“But tell me, how has this come to pass? Just earlier you and Lady Juliet were-”

“I know,” Romeo did not need the Friar to remind him that he was now a married man. Happily married to a most beautiful wife, but the events of late created a whole new slew of problems.

The guilt he felt gnawed at him.

With as much detail as possible, he recounted the duel to Friar Laurence, including Mercutio’s declaration and swift blade.

“Is there any truth in this?” The Friar wanted to know.

“Nay, none, for all I can tell. I know my cousin well. He is not taken to flights of fancy. He is meticulous and cautious and all too loyal to our family. There has been a grave misunderstanding.”

“One you feel will set the tone for future events?”

Romeo chewed a lip in thought. “Tybalt, for all his posturing did not deny any liaisons. Benvolio’s actions, although taken to protect the family from being banished may not be seen that way coupled with Mercutio’s loud accusations.”

Harsh but true. The fact that Benvolio continually protected Tybalt could in and of itself be seen as treason. No, this would not end well.

Added to that was Romeo’s own father. Dear as he was, any time the Capulets were even slightly mentioned sent the Lord Montague in a fuming rage. As much as Lord Montague knew of Benvolio’s loyalty, he put just as much stock into Mercutio’s honor. Mercutio’s words would be taken as truth.

Meaning Benvolio would be excommunicated from the Montagues before the night was up.

The guilt was still there, eating at Romeo’s insides. Romeo was the one secretly involved with a Capulet. Worse than involved, he was married to one now. The weight of his and Juliet’s actions hit him full force at that moment. Forget being excommunicated, Romeo would be drawn and quartered, father be damned.

All the more reason for no one to find out, at least until Benvolio’s situation had been sorted through. What’s more, he still did not know what the Prince’s ruling would be. No doubt the people in the square had told God and sundry the events of the duel. Romeo was not so much worried for himself or Benvolio; they had clearly been trying to prevent the fight. Everyone else’s fate was what remained undecided.
The Secret

Events happened very quickly, not that Romeo knew it. He remained oblivious, hidden within the walls of the Benedictine Monastery.

Prince Escalus arrived on scene scarce moments after Romeo and Benvolio had fled, confronting his still frozen kin.

“Halt, Mercutio. What is the meaning of this?”

Mercutio did not answer, still staring mesmerized at the blood-stained sword.

Seeing he would get no answer from his kinsman, Prince Escalus turned to the surrounding crowd, who had come out of hiding once the gruesome fight had ended.

“You, madam,” he addressed a nearby flower vendor. “Can you tell me the events that came to pass in this square?”

“Aye, my Prince,” she answered. “It was a right fearsome fight, that it was. Them Montagues were in the square when Tybalt and his men from the Capulets came right up to them. I couldn’t tell what was being said, but none of them looked too keen, if you catch my meaning. Romeo comes in, you know, the Montague heir, and Tybalt goes straight up to him and draws his sword.”

“That young one refused,” another vendor chimed in. The other townsfolk murmur in agreement. “He said something about kin and wouldn’t draw his sword. Mercutio… well, begging your majesty’s pardon, Mercutio didn’t like that one bit.” The vendor, an elder man, a fruit seller nodded his head at the still silent Mercutio.

In bits and pieces the events of the morning unfolded, told by many, many voices.

In a way, the events of the fight were less destructive than other instances. Instead of mass bedlam with all the members of the Houses fighting, only two fighters had been involved in the duel, one of which, to Escalus’ despair was his own kin.

“What have you to say for yourself?” Escalus asked his cousin.

Mercutio looked up, startled as if only just recognizing the Prince’s presence.

“My Lord,” Mercutio paused, fumbling for words. Much unlike him.

“Mercutio, speak.”

“I find, I cannot, my Lord. I do not deserve to.”

Mercutio took a shuddering breath, as though to fortify. “I fear I have gravely injured my friend, my brother in all but blood.”

“Benvolio of the House Montague?”

“Yes, my Lord.”

“And where is the boy now?”

“I know not, my Lord.”
One of the watchers, a young boy, piped up. “I heard them say they was going to see Friar Laurence, my Prince.”

“Friar Laurence, you say? The one at the Benedictine Abbey?”

“I think so, my Prince.”

Prince Escalus waved a hand at some of his men. “Go. Investigate. I want to know what the situation is.”

He turned back to the crowd at large, contemplating his next actions. It was clear to him that Tybalt had provoked the original action and Mercutio had escalated the situation. Still, the real one impacted by these events was Benvolio Montague, probably already disowned, if the rumors had made it back to the Lord Montague.

Given the Prince’s men had only been able to apprehend half the feuding crowd, that was looking more and more likely by the hour.

It was a shame. Benvolio was the only one in this whole godforsaken mess that did not deserve that fate. He was constantly the voice of reason, a stable star amid a galaxy of unease, always watching the chaos of everyone else’s violent, clashing waves.

Both the Prince’s and Romeo’s predictions turned true. Faced with the overwhelming family members demanding his banishment, Lord Antonio Montague had no choice but to sign the disownment papers and file them, despite his misgivings about the situation.

It was hard though. Since that morning, news of the events of the duel had spread, wildfire in a rainless forest, until everyone’s mouths were abuzz with Tybalt and Benvolio’s secret love affair. Benvolio’s pacifism had been noted before, but this proved to be a tipping point, the single stalk of straw that broke the camel’s back.

It was not an all out witch hunt. That Lord Montague had been thankful for.

But his councilors had agreed grudgingly that a quick disownment was the way to resolve the situation for all parties concerned. Benvolio was free to continue his liaisons - even marry the enemy Capulet, and none of that blemish would reflect back on the Montague name.

Simple. Effective. Romeo might object, but he would see the light. Eventually.

Prince Escalus dismissed the last of his citizens gathered in the square.

The bystanders, the vendors and shopkeepers, washerwomen and street children, drifted away as the excitement died with the arrival of law.

Those involved in the feud were chastised and sent home. Their names were recorded for future punishment, but until the Prince could decide what to do with his own kin for his part in the fight, he could scarcely discipline anyone else.

Mercutio was sent home, not yet aroused from his near comatose state.

The whole affair had taken no more than three passings of an hour to wrap up. Witnesses were interviewed, damages were calculated, all the while a steady stream of the Prince’s messengers flowed in and out, delivering notes of the latest backlash from this event.
Thus it was a contemplative, pensive Prince Escalus who left the square with a small entourage of five men. They wound their way to the Benedictine Abbey, home of Friar Laurence and the location of the two wayward Montagues.

One of the men he had originally sent had reported back swiftly enough that the young men they sought were in residence at the Abbey, but that Benvolio was seriously injured and could not be moved. Deciding first hand information would be the most useful, the Prince went in person to speak with them.

One of the brothers greeted them at the entrance and lead them to infirmary.

Benvolio Montague was propped in a white bed, pale but alive. White bandages were wrapped around his chest; his blonde hair drooped into his eyes as he did his best to bow to Prince Escalus.

Romeo Montague and Friar Laurence, sitting on either side of the injured young man, rose fully, both dropping into dutiful bows.

“Benvolio, Romeo, Friar Laurence,” the Prince nodded in acknowledgement.

“Prince Escalus,” Friar Laurence stood straight. “Welcome to our Abbey. Your men mentioned that you desired to speak with Romeo and Benvolio.”

“That I would, good Father.”

“Very good, very good.”

When the Friar made no move to leave, the Prince cleared his throat tactfully. “Alone, if you would oblige me, Friar.”

“Ah, of course, my Prince.”

As the Friar exited, the Prince took his seat to the left of Benvolio, across from Romeo. His men left after seeing the Friar out, standing guard on the other side to make sure no one would interrupt them. Escalus took his time eyeing the two young Montagues. They were battered, that much was clear; emotionally wounded, Benvolio more so than his cousin for obvious reasons.

“Young Benvolio,” Prince Escalus finally broke the silence. “I am pleased that you are well.”

“Thank you, my Prince.”

“You know why I am here?”

Romeo spoke this time. “Yes, my Prince.”

“Very well then. I believe you had best begin at the beginning. Romeo, you first.”

Romeo’s description agreed with the general consensus, but did not make any notable reason why he chose not to agree to the duel with Tybalt. Brushing that aside for right now, Escalus probed deeper.

“Had you seen any evidence of this supposed love affair that Tybalt was having with Benvolio?”

“Nay, my Prince.” Here Romeo paused, as the remembering. His brows furrowed and his expression changed to one of thoughtful recognition. “On the other hand, I have not been the most attentive these last few days since the Masquerade. I confess that I would not have noticed even if something had happened.”
“But you are convinced that nothing did happen between Tybalt and Benvolio?”

“Aye, my Prince.”

“What about in the fight today? Do you believe Mercutio was specifically aiming for Benvolio in an effort to take his revenge on a supposed ‘traitor’?”

Harsh but it needed to be said. Romeo drew an affronted breath. “Never, my Prince. It was a terrible accident. Mercutio was overtaken by rage, aiming for Tybalt and did not see Benvolio come between them.”

Escalus nonchalantly looked away. In tone purposefully light but with an underlying note of steel, the Prince said, “According to my last decree, all of you involved in the fight should be banished from Verona. What say you?”

The two young cousins looked at each other. He could not read what passed in between the two of them, but their resolve was iron-clad as both turned back to face him.

“If you believe that is the best, most effective course of action, my Prince, then we would not argue.” Benvolio spoke this time, his face drawn and shadowed. “But in the name of clemency, I would like to point out that only two individuals actually drew swords. Everyone else was as innocent as the common citizenry. No damages occurred and the only one injured was myself. I certainly would not ask anyone to be banished on my account.”

“Not even Mercutio, mine own kin who so grievously wounded you or noble Tybalt, whose slanderous actions of late have caused you many hardships?”

If Escalus was expecting an exclamatory statement, a quick, valiant, humorous wit of wisdom to defuse the tension, he did not show his disappointment when Benvolio instead built up the tension, refusing to make light of the precarious situation they all found themselves in.

Benvolio took as much time as he needed. Escalus could almost see him turning over every possible scenario in his head, examining the costs, the benefits, and his own personal feelings with a comb as fine as any he had seen.

This solemn moment was broken as Benvolio relaxed back into bed. “Nay. This feud has caused too much pain already.”

“Some would say thou art too generous.”

“They may say as they wish.”

“Very well,” Escalus was internally thankful that he would not have to punish Mercutio. He would never be able to punish Mercutio than the boy would do to himself.

“I do wonder,” the Prince continued. “How it came to pass that you, Benvolio, came to be involved with Tybalt? Fictionally, that is?”

Benvolio signed heavily, exchanging a glance with Romeo. Romeo nodded and have an encouraging smile.

“I suppose it starts at the Capulet’s party,” Benvolio started.

His story was filled with misinformation and misunderstandings, an innocent caught in a nasty trick. Tybalt had played him, but played the Montagues most of all, caused them to show the true evil of
human nature and how quickly they turned on each other.

“Tybalt’s a rogue,” Benvolio finished. “But I don’t blame him. He acted to try to draw a wedge and he succeeded. But it was Mercutio who allowed him to succeed. And my family as well, though I dread to think of what has happened.”

Prince Escalus internally winced. News had flooded back to him that Lord Montague had disowned the younger man.

Benvolio must have seen something of that ill news in the Prince’s face for he nodded in understanding. “It has already happened then?”

“Aye, young Benvolio.”

“I have been cast out.” A statement of fact, bitter, yes, but not a cry of pain and surprise. Benvolio’s eyes shadowed, his mouth quirked downward, aggrieved by the news that he no longer had a home.

“No!” Romeo pronounced, in opposition to his cousin’s calm acceptance. He was fire and heart, burning brightly at the grave news. “I will not let them.”

“It has already been done,” the Prince explained gently. “The paper work has been signed and filed through the proper channels. I have no choice but to accept it.”

“It is alright, Romeo,” Benvolio tried to comfort his cousin. “Besides, I have never truly fit in, too pacifist for your father’s liking. Perhaps it is best this way.”

Romeo still looked unhappy but his vocal exclamations simmered into a baleful pout.

“Take heart, young Romeo,” the Prince comforted. “Benvolio will not be cast onto the street. I myself will provide him with a roof and all the trappings of home, in recompense for my kin’s disgraceful actions.”

“Thank you, Prince Escalus,” Benvolio murmured thankfully.

The situation was settled nicely. No one would be banished, luckily for all those involved, but Escalus was content. It would have reflected badly upon himself if he had to banish his own kin for getting involved in a feud that was not Mercutio’s to defend.

The Prince rose from his chair, crossed the room and opened the door, biding his men and the old Friar to once again join the conversation.

“Now then Friar, how long will it take Benvolio to heal?” He asked, once everyone had settled into chairs.

Friar Laurence hummed and mumbled to himself for a little while. “With my herbs it should take a few days before he is out of danger, but many more weeks before he is fully healed.”

“May he be moved after those few days?”

“Aye, my Prince, but slowly and gently.”

The infirmary quieted, only for that peace to be shattered when the door slammed open.

Juliet of the House Capulet, all of almost 14, hair streaming behind her like a rich standard, rushed in, a tornado in the calm infirmary. She spotted her target, ignoring all other influences as beelined for Prince Escalus.
Dropping into a low curtsy in front of the befuddled royal, she announced in a clear voice. “My Prince, I beg of you for clemency.”

“Whatsoever for?” He responded, still bemused by the sudden and unexpected entrance of this young enemy of the Montagues.

“For Romeo and myself. It was not Romeo’s fault. Our marriage was my idea. Please do not punish him or Friar Laurence.”

Romeo’s epiphany came too late to warn Juliet of her folly. Somehow the girl had gotten the wrong impression, thinking the Prince’s presence was in response to their sudden and ill-advised union, rather than the fight and Benvolio’s injury.

The Prince, though ignorant of the marriage up until Juliet’s mention of it, understood that as well. Still, he took a couple of deep breaths, silently asking the Gods for patience as this new and completely headache-inducing piece of information reached his ears for the first time.

“My dear girl,” Escalus started speaking again once his emotions had calmed. “I am afraid you are operating under a grave misapprehension. I did not come here to punish Romeo or even in reference to your marriage at all.”

Juliet let out a soft, “Oh.” Realizing for the first time that she had basically outed herself and her new husband to what was equivalent to the direct force of law.

“But now I think Friar Laurence and I must have a conversation.”

Juliet’s sudden arrival shifted the meeting dramatically. Her ardent announcement was confirmed by Friar Laurence. While the Prince and the Friar had a battle of wills through fierce whispers in the corner, Juliet settled at Romeo’s side, not repentant exactly for her brash entrance but definitely embarrassed by her lapse in decorum.

“Well then, dear cousin, I believe congratulations are in order for your unexpected but happy nuptials?” Benvolio managed to say with little more than a raised eyebrow and quirk of the mouth to give away his mirth.

Romeo was not fooled.

“I can hear your unspoken jests, good Benvolio. Kindly cease and desist.”

Benvolio let a couple chuckles escape, his eyes alighting with joy and mischief. “Peace, Romeo, peace.”

His eyes softened, taking in the picture before him. Juliet had all but plastered herself to Romeo’s side, somehow managing to avail herself of the scant space left on Romeo’s chair, using it to sit hip to hip, thigh to thigh with her new husband. Romeo lovingly took her hand in his, delivering a swift kiss to the knuckle in as an unspoken, tender greeting.

“I am happy for you, for both of you. Would that I were am to, I would heartily welcome you into the family.”

“You will always be my family, no matter what any soul says.”

Benvolio gave a tremulous smile.
Juliet’s puzzled expression told Benvolio that she had not heard the full story from the gossip grapevine.

“Lady Juliet, how came you to this place?” He asked of her, honestly curious how the rumors had spread.

“I was passing by mine father’s drawing room when I heard raised voices and unhappy tones coming from within. I was curious,” she admitted. “So I leaned against the door and heard my father and my cousin, Tybalt speaking in violent discourse. I was only able to catch a fleeting word, the others escaped my ear, absorbed into the heavy door. Tybalt said something about a fight between Mercutio and he. Someone very dear to him had received a grave injury. The Prince arrived on the scene and was to confront Romeo at Friar Laurence’s Benedictine Abbey. My Lord Father was very upset,” she said in a small voice.

“It was only natural for you to assume the worst,” Romeo assured her, eager to comfort his lady love.

“So I escaped through the servant’s entrance, finding some old clothing to disguise myself. I am relieved you are well,” she added, addressing Romeo. Then, realizing her callous-sounding words when Benvolio was so near at hand after being stabbed she stammered, “I meant no offense, dear Benvolio, I only-”

“Do not fret,” he laughed to show her no offense was taken. “I understand. Still, it puzzles me that Tybalt would claim someone dear to him was injured. To my knowledge I was the only victim.”

Juliet, though very naive in some ways, could apparently sense her ignorance in regards to a serious and unsaid issue.

“Begging your pardon, good Benvolio, but what has happened? I would like to know the whole truth of it, if you are willing to tell it to me.”

Benvolio traded a glance with Romeo, but he already knew he would answer in the affirmative. Given this is the second time telling this story, it went much swifter than when speaking about it with the Prince. The Prince had also interjected any number of times, asking for important clarification to get the story straight from all angles.

He also admitted that he had been cast out of the House Montague, on charges of fraternizing with the enemy.

“That’s horrible,” Juliet proclaimed once he had finished. “I am sorry for Tybalt’s hand in this affair.”

“Although he is your kin, you cannot take responsibility for his actions no more than I am responsible for Romeo’s actions. The world does not work that way.” Benvolio stated.

“Still, I know my cousin. He can be mean-spirited at times, but he is never purposefully cruel. He did sound genuinely upset that you were hurt.”

“It is most probable he feels a certain guilt.”

“As well he should,” Romeo added. “Begging your pardon, my lady wife, but though he is not completely responsible for the situation, he did not work to rectify it either. If thou art not part of the solution, then thou art part of the problem.”

“Very wise, young Romeo,” the Prince’s voice echoed from across the room. It appeared as though he was done conversing with Friar Laurence. The man of God looked like he had just escaped being
mauled by a very ferocious lion.

The aforementioned lion, or really, a very tightly coiled Prince Escalus, had set his sights on Romeo and Juliet.

“However, you two seem to have created an entirely new problem all by yourselves. Quite a feet when there are only two of you, and Friar Laurence. Where was this lauded wisdom when you decided to marry each other?” He roared like a lion, causing even his guards to look askance at him.

“I care not for our family’s feud,” Juliet said daringly, her star shining just as brightly as her new husband’s. “I am his and he is mine, under the eyes of God. Let them cast us out.”

“You silly girl,” the Prince muttered, his leonine cry all but gone in the face of such sheer naivety and innocence. “It will take much more than just pretty words to sooth this over with Lord Capulet and Lord Montague. I seem to remember in particular that you, Lady Juliet, are promised to mine own kin, Lord Paris.”

Juliet made a face that perfectly illustrated what she thought of that.

“Well, Paris should be easy enough,” the Prince admitted. “He always was a bit of a romantic at heart. The Lords Capulet and Montague however will be another problem entirely.”

Neither Romeo nor Juliet replied.

“Does anyone else know of this union, besides the Friar and your nurse, Lady Juliet?”

“Nay, my Prince.”

“Very good. Ignorance will be our friend in this endeavour. Keep silent as long as possible. Do you understand?”

“Aye, my Prince,” Romeo pledged. Juliet repeated her husband’s words.

“Do not worry. All will be resolved. In fact, we might be able to use Benvolio’s banishment to our advantage.”

Benvolio wondered how that would be possible, but decided not to question the prince. After a couple more words, Prince Escalus sent Juliet home, so as not to arouse more suspicion, accompanied by one of his men.

The Prince turned to Romeo, “Well now, young Romeo, you must leave as well.”

“My Prince,” Romeo looked down as though ashamed of his own words. “I fear if I return to the Montague House I may do or say something of grievous injury to my kin. I cannot forgive them for what they did to mine own cousin.”

Benvolio was touched that Romeo kept using cousin in reference to himself, a very obvious showing of Romeo’s rejection of his father’s ruling. He also realized the folly of Romeo’s thoughts.

“Romeo,” Benvolio said for the bed. “Please, cousin, do not be mad at your father. He did what he thought was best. I do not hate him for his error.”

“How?” Romeo questioned, interrupting what Benvolio was going to say next. “He has banished you on the word of an outsider. Mercutio is a friend, this I admit and has been for many years, but he is not blood, is not kin.”
“Aye, but perhaps he thought this the most kind method as well. If I truly were carried up with Tybalt, now I would be able to pursue that romance unhampered.”

“But for the fact that you have no money, no home, only the hatred of all those allied with the Montague to you name.” Romeo leapt from his chair, pacing the floor in furious anger. “How can you stand it?”

“I stand it because I must,” Benvolio said gently. “Do not mistake my calm for subservience; I am my own man and I believe Lord Montague’s decision was ill advised, if not for my own sake than for the rest of the Montague’s. Change is coming, cousin. Can you not feel it in the river breezes and the stirrings of restless voices? These actions of this day are at its heart.”

The actualities of Lord Capulet and Tybalt’s communication in the drawing room were much less and much more than what Juliet overheard.

Tybalt had retreated from the market square, stealthily bounding through the back alleys, eager to miss the thrum of the crowded, vibrant streets of Verona. They were no doubt already hearing about his fight with that idiot pup.

His whole body was alight with tension from the unexpected end to the fight. His original plan had been to soundly thrash the Montague heir in a duel, embarrassing him in recompense for the embarrassment Tybalt had to feel having the enemy Montagues walk unmolested through his uncle’s party.

But then Romeo refused, completely unexpectedly. The fiery, proud whelp had never acted this way before; he had always been more than happy to see the feud carried forward into the new generation, acting in counterpoint to Tybalt.

Mercutio had took up the duel in Romeo’s stead. Not unexpected. The cousin of the Prince was far too emotionally entangled with this feud that so upset his own kin.

Then Benvolio got involved.

And everything went to hell in a handbasket.

What was worse, now Tybalt felt guilt. He hated feeling guilty.

Even he could not deny the ball of guilt in his stomach; it was a leech, a parasite, teeth like razor knives that cut into his very soul.

Honestly, it had started as a joke, albeit a cruel one. Benvolio had always peaked his interest, the lone Montague brave - or foolish - enough to caution his kin against fighting. He was pretty too, pale blond hair, eyes blue as the sea in full swell and a handsome face. He was passionate but not as expressive as his boisterous cousin. Benvolio tended to keep things inward, when others might shout their emotions to the world. Some might mistake his behavior as timid but after that dance, Tybalt knew Benvolio had a spine of steel, but chose to only show it when necessary.

That Tybalt could respect. Tybalt did respect the young man. The lad was only 17, seven years his junior, but wiser than most.

Tybalt slipped into a back entrance to the Capulet Compound. He avoided the bustle in the main hall; no doubt everyone else from the fight was now trickling in, spreading the news of Tybalt’s duel and Mercutio’s accusations. Instead he headed directly to Lord Capulet’s drawing room.
That’s where his uncle found him two hours later, still sitting on one of the plush leather armchairs with a contemplative look on his face.

“So when should I start planning the wedding, dear nephew?” Lord Capulet’s jesting tone belied the serious look in his eyes.

“Uncle,” Tybalt greeted.

Silence. Tybalt was unwilling to start the conversation that he knew had to happen. It only served to strengthen his guilt.

Finally he broke. “What are they saying then?” A poisonous curiosity made him wonder about what rumors the rest of the Capulets parried about like so many empty words.

“Oh, the usual. You seduced young Benvolio Montague. Made him turn traitor. Mercutio found out and had him banish’d from the Montagues.”

Tybalt hummed under his breath, not really digesting the words. When he did return to the world he did a quick double take.

“Banish’d?”

“Aye. And that is no falsehood. Word just came from the city clerk. Benvolio is no longer a Montague, thanks to your actions.” More silence. The guilt exploded in Tybalt’s innards. “This was pure stupidity, Tybalt. What were you thinking?”

“It was not supposed to play out this way,” Tybalt admitted. He took a shuddering breath and pull his splintered mind from the many facets of emotions it was feeling. Guilt from his own actions, anger at the Montagues, sorrow for Benvolio, embarrassment for his public folly.

“Well how did you expect it to turn out?” His uncle demanded. “Do not answer that. It is perfectly clear you had no idea to begin with. And now we - no, you must fix this.”

“This was not my intent,” Tybalt hurt to consider all the mistakes he would have to mend. “But I will do everything in my power to set this to rights.”

“I am pleased to hear it, nephew, for the Prince will be the first of our detractors.”

“If the Prince is to punish me, he must be harsher on his own kin. Mercutio was the one to strike the blow to Benvolio, not I.”

“True. Perchance we may use that to our advantage. What will you do about the former Montague?”

“Do, Uncle?” As a Montague, even a former one, Tybalt had assumed his uncle would overlook Benvolio’s plight.

“Honor must be satisfied.” Ever the lord, the master of House Capulet was swift to remind his nephew of their duty. Never let it be said that any member of their family was derelict when duty and honor were on the line. “The fault is ours that he is homeless, clanless, and without a name.”

“To be fair,” Tybalt pointed out. “Montague was the one to exile his own kin, on the word of an outsider.”

“Aye, true enough. Lord Montague did not have to place such faith in words, unsupported by actions. But you played a part as well, never forget.”
“Aye, and for that I am profoundly sorry. Benvolio is precious, a priceless diamond among dung. He was always far too intelligent for those cursed Montagues.”

“You were watching him?”

“I make it a point to know all our enemies. He is close with Romeo, the future leader of our adversaries. It stands to reason that had these events not occurred, Benvolio might very well have been in a key position of power when Romeo takes on the mantle of Lord Montague.”

“Very wise, Tybalt.” His uncle’s mouth quirked, a half smile forming on his lips.

“I learned from the best.”

“And what have you perceived about the former Montague?”

Tybalt was sure that his uncle was merely playing with him now. There was no way on the Good Lord’s earth that Lord Capulet had not been handed a fully detailed dossier on Benvolio by his intelligence network the second after Benvolio left the Capulet Compound the night of the Masquerade.

However discretion is the better part of valour. One thing his uncle always tried to encourage was choosing when to pick one’s battles.

“Benvolio is Romeo’s younger cousin, with roughly seventeen summers behind him. He is close to his cousin, almost like brothers, often joined by Mercutio, the Prince’s cousin. Benvolio is more studious inclined than the other two, maybe even more so than anyone else in the House Montague. He is also a self-proclaimed pacifist and has been known to try to quell any quarreling between Montagues and Capulets when he can. His beliefs and high intelligence has earned him favor of the Prince before. The Prince’s wife, Lady Adrianna, is especially taken with the former Montague, as they share a similar love of the written word and have been known to converse for hours at parties about literary topics.”

“So he is intelligent and well thought of by those not involved in our feud.” More of a statement and less of a question, Tybalt nevertheless answered his uncle’s query.

“Yes, uncle.”

“His injuries will not be well perceived by those same unbiased parties.”

“I should think not,” Tybalt agreed. “What are you planning this time, uncle?”

“I am doing what needs to be done for the good of House Capulet.”
The Prince took his time in calling the heads of Montague and Capulet into his domain. A firm believer in people’s ability to be their own worst enemy, one of his favorite tactics was using people’s own fears and anxieties against them.

In this instance the tactic was less successful than it been in previous instances. Lord Capulet and Lord Montague were veterans of these kind of politics and were well schooled in all the different strategies the Prince had employed over the years.

Lord Montague was summoned first, two days after the events in the market square had taken place. Prince Escalus nodded to the Head of the Montagues in greeting as the powerful lord was shown into his parlor. A subtle hand signal of dismissal was directed to his attendants and prompted a quick exodus by the members of his staff, leaving the two men alone to converse. Lord Montague, whose Christian name was Antonio, sat gingerly on a dark brown leather chair opposite the Prince.

Escalus peered across his desk at his opponent. Like his patriarchal predecessors, Escalus had worked without success to end the pointless and bloody feud between the Montagues and Capulets. Thus far there had been no luck.

However, Fate’s wheels were now starting to turn in a different direction.

“I trust you know why I called you here?” The Prince prompted.

“Aye, my Prince. The incident in the square that happened two days ago.”

“Correct. You do remember the penalty I decreed upon those Montagues and Capulets caught fighting in the streets, disturbing the public peace, yes?” Escalus fixed the lord with a penetrating stare, his stormy grey eyes alert and attentive.

Montague did not flinch. “Aye, my Prince.”

“Good. As you are no doubt aware, members of your House attended the fight, and your son and former nephew were directly implicated in it.”

“I hardly think to qualify Romeo as being directly involved. According to the spectators present, Romeo denied fighting Tybalt. He should be rewarded, Your Highness, since he tried to end the fight before it even started.” So, he had a firm legal base to stand on. It was not surprising. Escalus would have been disappointed if the other man had crumbled in such a short amount of time. No doubt the lord had assembled his legal advisors swiftly after the news broke and they had devised this very answer for when the issue was inevitably brought up.

“That I will concede. But other members of your House did nothing but exacerbate the problem.”

“My Prince, I hardly think it fair that you should punish my house for being bystanders, when Tybalt of the House Capulet was not only the instigator of the fight but also one of the main combatants.”

He could not tip his hand for what he had planned for the Capulets so he let the matter drop. “You speak truth. However, there is another matter we need to discuss.”

“Benvolio.” It seemed the Lord Montague had been expecting the topic to be broached. A pained
grimace crossed his face but then was wiped away, quick as sunbeams.

“Your former nephew?” Escalus preferred to prompt people to speak, rather than start the conversation. It often brought out new aspects to the discussion that the Prince might not have found otherwise if he kept in control of the conversation.

“Aye. And for that I am sorry.” And Antonio Montague truly looked it. His broad frame sloped slightly, head bowed the slightest degree.

Silence.

The Prince took a few moments to pause, to consider. From a political standpoint, he understood why the action had been made. An example had to be set. Benvolio was just the poor victim who was ambushed in the crossfire.

“But his actions were unbecoming of the Montague House. He fraternized with the enemy, shaming his familial obligations.”

Escalus still did not speak. He could tell there was more that needed to be said.

Sure enough, Montage obliged him. “Besides,” the other man admitted in a softer voice, “he will be happier this way. Benvolio never truly fit in. And now he can court with whomever he so wishes.”

“Ah, but what about bride-price, dowry, and the bartering that have everything to do with marriage?” Escalus would not let the Montague Lord forget about the finer details. “How will Benvolio pay for some place to live, let alone the debts he now incurs from needing someone to treat his wounds?”

Montague grimaced again, forgetting to hide this one as well as the prior one. “Benvolio is resourceful. I am sure the Capulets would be more than eager to welcome him with open arms.”

The last part was said with some bitterness, which Escalus now at last decided to break it and break it hard.

“It would behoove you to know, Lord Montague, that Benvolio, your former nephew, was not involved in an illicit affair with anyone, leastwise a Capulet. It is true that Benvolio danced several time with Tybalt at the Capulet Masquerade (a dance your son and Mercutio also attended) and received one letter from that same man (so too did Romeo, in all honesty’s sake), but according to everyone I have interviewed, Montagues, Capulets, my court alike, none have been able to place those two in the same part of the city, let alone the same room other than the instances in question.

“Not only that, but no servants have delivered letters between the two compounds. Unless there was a completely extraordinary way for the two to make contact, there exists no evidence of an affair between Tybalt Capulet and Benvolio, formerly Montague.”

“That impossible,” Lord Montague said, losing his frigid demeanor for the first time during their whole conversation. “Mercutio would never lie, not about something like this.”

“Lying is not the same as misinformation.”

The other man rallied himself admirably. “Be that as it may, you will forgive me, my Prince, if I have my people conduct my own investigation?”

Prince Escalus had a feeling that Montague’s people had already done an investigation and finished it, but were too afraid to give him the ill news. Still, the royal inclined his head in agreement. “Not at all, Lord Montague. Besides, this business is not mine to meddle it. It is yours and yours alone.”
The responsibility is yours for the entire affair if this goes pear-shaped’ was what Escalus let remain unsaid.

Montague received the message clear as a clap of thunder split an empty midnight.

Lord Capulet refused to let Prince Escalus dictate the power in this situation. As soon as he heard Montague had been called in like an unruly boy summoned before the disciplinarian, he had notified Tybalt with the intent to adjourn to the Palace as soon as possible.

The Prince did not seem to be caught off guard by the two Capulet men brazenly calling upon him. Lord Capulet knew Escalus to be a swift and cunning politician, so he was not precisely worried about that.

“Prince Escalus,” Capulet said with a suave smile. “Thank you for seeing us on such a short notice.”


“Yes, indeed, I most certainly do. And I would very much care to talk with him, so I thank you for bringing him along.”

“It was no trouble,” Lord Capulet and Tybalt settled into a dark green, velvet settee. The Prince sat on an armchair placed perpendicular to them. The Lord noted that the positioning was not completely hostile, as the Prince had chosen to sit perpendicular to them, not across as one might sit across from an enemy. That boded well.

“My Prince, thank you for agreeing to meet with us,” Tybalt added and then made his own remarks. “First of all, please let me apologize for the abhorrent display I was a part of in the market square two days ago. I never intended that anyone be harmed, least of all Benvolio.”

“Indeed?”

“Yes. My original goal was to scare Romeo of the Montagues. I never intended that a duel of that caliber to erupt, though your kin Mercutio is quite the excellent swordsman. I trust he is recovered?”

A smooth jab at the person who held the most blame in this situation.

On the Prince’s raise eyebrows signalled his amusement at the game that was being played. “Yes, my kinsman is well recovered.”

“And Benvolio? Guilt gnaws at my heart for the grievous injury I caused him. I hope he is well?”

“As well as can be for the injuries he has sustained, both to his body and his soul.”

Admitting or bringing up Mercutio’s role in Benvolio’s misfortune would be an underhanded shot, so neither party brought up the elephant in the room. However the tension remained quite palpable.

“What is to become of him?” Lord Capulet enquired with just the right amount of offhanded concern.

“Currently he is recovering in the Benedictine Abbey until he can safely be moved. After, he will reside in my Palace until the situation has been resolved to my satisfaction.”
“That is most generous of you,” Capulet complemented.

“It is no trouble. Also, my wife would not have let me into her bed if I had let her favorite sparring partner out in the cold.” Escalus said this with a hint of warmth. It only confirmed what Tybalt had said, about Benvolio’s curious bond with Princess Adrianna.

“Then Benvolio is most fortunate to have such a friend in Princess Adrianna as well as yourself, my Prince.” Tybalt said. Then, he began to move their plan into motion. “I do wish I could see Benvolio, to apologize in person for this horrible affair. I had not intended my overtures to compile into such a twisted pile of maggot dung. I cannot imagine what he must be feeling.”

Escalus raised an eyebrow at the mention of Tybalt’s overtures. “Indeed? Well, I have spoken to him about these events and he does bear you no ill will, though in my opinion an apology would not be remiss at the very least. I must inquire about your overtures, however. Now that Benvolio is without kin, I have taken it upon myself to act as guardian for the young lad, so any suits you have must be approved by Adrianna and myself.”

Tybalt appeared taken back, but Lord Capulet knew the surprise was false. They had discussed earlier the likelihood of Benvolio coming under Prince Escalus’ protection. Given all the variables, this was the most likely scenario they had predicted.

“Truly, your highness? That is remarkable news. But whoever said anything about a suit or courtship of any kind?”

“You mean your pursuits of my ward at the Capulet Masquerade was not an opening to a longer courtship? What about the letter you sent to him the next day?”

Tybalt did not blush but his embarrassment was not feigned in the slightest. No matter how much they had planned to reveal all, Capulet knew his nephew hated having his follies examined in detail.

“I will admit to all, my plans did not reach beyond the swift hand of the night’s waning hours.”

“Then why did you accept Benvolio’s offer to dance in the first place?”

“I was curious,” Tybalt freely acknowledged with nonchalant honesty. “Here was a Montague, a sworn enemy, in the middle of a lion’s den, asking a lion to dance. Without any fear showing. Before, I had always thought him the most cowardly of the Montagues. He proved me wrong very resoundingly.”

Escalus smiled softly. “The other Montagues never really saw it, but for all his pacifism, Benvolio has great fortitude and strength.”

Tybalt nodded, his own expression losing some of its stern countenance. “I admit I was unnecessarily cruel. I goaded him and played with him for as many dances as I could, refusing to let him go.”

“He told me as such,” Escalus confirmed.

“Then I brought him to mine uncle.”

“I was most impressed with the boy,” Lord Capulet admitted freely. “He is wise beyond what his physical years would suggest.”

“Aye, that he is,” Escalus agreed.
“Benvolio is a gracious prize for any would-be courter. Anymore I might say on the matter I would feel more comfortable to take these matters up with Benvolio first,” Tybalt fixed the Prince with a serious and solemn expression.

“Aye, it is truth. But you will find, arrogant pup, that I take my responsibilities towards the young man most seriously. Who are you to deny the first steps of official courtship?”

“What my nephew means, my Prince,” Lord Capulet cut in, playing the smooth-talking Lord, to no one’s surprise. “Is that he is concerned with Benvolio’s feelings. Benvolio may be unwilling to enter into a courtship with someone who was so recently his enemy, even if he harbors no ill will. It would do the lad no good if you planned out his life for him, no matter how well intentioned your actions are.”

The nagging feeling of guilt twinged Lord Capulet’s stomach as his mind flashed to his daughter Juliet and the courtship offer of Lord Paris.

Prince Escalus considered that. “Very well. Sir Tybalt, you are most welcome to call on Benvolio in three days time, at my Palace. Afterwards we will discuss your suit in detail.”

It took four days for Benvolio to recover enough to be moved. He languished in the infirmary with an anxious heart, prying information from Friar Laurence or the other Friars whenever they came in to check on him or deliver him food.

Finally the Friar sent word to the Prince that Benvolio could leave. Four of the Prince’s men appeared at the heavy gateway scant hours later, ready and waiting. When two of the men bent down to hoist him into their arms to be carried in a sitting position, Benvolio protested heavily. He was politely ignored.

“Begging your pardon, young Benvolio, but our Prince would have our heads if we allowed you to reinjure yourself in our watch.”

Benvolio thought about pouting, but eventually decided that discretion was the better part of valour. At least he wasn’t on a litter or being carried bridal style.

Still he was glad for the relatively short walk to the Prince’s palace. Laid carefully upon the bank of the River Adige in the heart of Verona, it was a solid and stalworth rising mass of brick and mortar, carved and sculptured over centuries of rule.

The four men brought Benvolio through the gate, up the stairs of the entrance hall and into the labyrinthine corridors of the palace. The young man quickly lost track of the twists and turns they took, having never been beyond the public rooms of the Palace for the various social functions he had attended prior as a member of the Montague family. It was ironic now that as an outcast, he had more sway with the Prince.

They entered the private wing of the Palace, home to the Prince and his wife, Adrianna. The walls were set with frescos, biblical and mythological scenes played out above their heads in breathtaking colors.

A long corridor and then a left took them to an open guest room. Room was a bit of a misnomer, in Benvolio’s opinion. It was a wing in and of itself. they entered into a spacious drawing room, well lit and airy. From one of the windows, Benvolio could see the River Adige. Through one door he caught site of a plush bedroom. Through another was a bathing room.

Prince Escalus sat waiting for them in a high-backed chair, casually eyeing some official looking
leaflets of paper.

The royal chuckled at Benvolio’s disgruntled look when he was finally set down from his unwanted carriers’ arms. “I am sorry for the embarrassment; they were acting under my strict orders.”

“I was made aware of that, my Prince,” Benvolio said with chagrin.

“I trust the past few days have not been too trying on you?”

“My body is much improved, my Prince, but my heart still aches.” It was true. Benvolio had had four agonizingly long days to toss and turn, thoughts bouncing back and forth in his head like a tennis ball being batted about. Worry for Romeo, worry for Juliet, his new cousin, even worry for Mercutio, whose punishment had not been announced to the general public.

“Come, sit,” the Prince ordered, nodding to a leather armchair to his right. “I do not want you to reinjure yourself in my care.”

Benvolio acquiesced, sinking thankfully into the warm leather. Although he was loathe to show it, the journey had taken more out of him than he cared to admit.

“I will do what I can to assuage some of your fears,” Escalus continued. “Some of them are beyond my power, however.”

“Anything you would be able to provide would be appreciated, my Prince,” Benvolio said softly.

“But before we begin,” Escalus turned to his men, all four still standing at attention near the door. “Please have someone bring up some refreshments. Also summon Elio.”

“Yes, Prince Escalus,” they said in unison and then bowed a polite exit. Escalus waited for the door to fully close before turning back to Benvolio.

“Now then, I shall start from the beginning. Two days ago I had several meetings with all parties involved, including Lord Capulet, Tybalt, and Lord Montague.”

He swiftly summarized the events of the past week, taking care to emphasize not only what had been said, but the emotional and political undertones of each meeting. Benvolio was a quick student to politics and was able to keep up and debate with the Prince the finer nuances of each action.

“I do not begrudge the actions made to land me in this position,” Benvolio stated once again. “Mine uncle took the course of action he thought best suited to the situation at hand. With the information he had at the time, it was the most logical choice.”

“But that puts him in a bind now. As I told him, and probably his intelligence network too, there is no evidence of an affair with Tybalt, which is the reason for your banishment. Interested parties outside his house, least of all myself, do not approve of such a hasty and ill-advised decision.”

“Should not those parties also be critical of your decision not to punish Mercutio?”

“True, true. But I have made those certain parties aware of your well known kindness and mercy. What’s more, when your wound is aptly healed, I shall hold a small gathering, with those interested parties.”

“And naturally I will attend, to tell everyone myself that I wished for no more strife in the streets of Verona.”
“Naturally.”

Benvolio paused for a moment, the epitome of contemplation as his eyes shuttered and a frown appeared across his visage.

“There is something else, is there not?” He finally said, the blue pools of his eyes roving the Prince’s guarded expression. “Something that concerns me?”

“Aye,” Escalus admitted, once more marveling at the keen intellect Benvolio possessed. The royal did not answer for a few moments. He was unsure how to broach the plan the Capulets had come up with.

“Is it that bad?” Benvolio hesitantly asked, subtly withdrawing into himself. It made him look all of his seventeen years and not a day older.

Unsure how gently ease into the topic, Escalus decided that flattery and fromp would do nothing but make a mockery of Benvolio’s intelligence.

“It would solve many of our problems.” Escalus gave a helpless shrug.

“What is it?”

“Lord Capulet has proposed a courtship between yourself and his nephew, Tybalt.”

Benvolio wished he could say he was surprised, but that would be a disservice to himself.

“At my former position, were not my House enemies to the Capulets, a match to such an influential and powerful family would prove high honors, indeed.” The younger man mused. “And sir Tybalt is noble, valiant even. Proud most definitely, but with all the personality, talent, aspects, and intelligence to back it up.”

“You forget his arrogance and his pejorative attitude towards any and all things that displease him,” the Prince added with a touch a humor.

“Aye, that much is true enough.” Benvolio gave the barest hint of a smile. “He can have all the trappings of a cantankerous cat.”

“Which is why my kin, Mercutio calls him the ‘King of Cats’, correct?” Escalus said with some mischief. He was well aware of the playfully jabbing nickname Mercutio had devised.

Benvolio appeared embarrassed at Escalus’ intimate knowledge of their jokes. “Aye, my Prince.”

“No harm done, young one. I dare say even Lord Capulet would be hard pressed to deny the accuracy of that nickname at some times.” Benvolio gave a tremulous smile.

A polite knock interrupted any response Benvolio was about to make. Escalus glanced at the door. “Come in,” he called strongly.

The head of his kitchen, a gruff but hearty man named Teodosio entered with a tray overloaded by a teapot, associated tea paraphernalia, and a truly impressive amount of pastries and cakes. His kitchen must have heard about their new guest and wanted to make a good impression. It was unusual for Teodosio to deal with the Prince’s request himself.

“Your tea, Prince Escalus,” Teodosio said, placing the tray down on the side table.

Benvolio’s eyes were already widening at the veritable feast spread out before him. Escalus and
Teodosio traded a pleased look.

“Benvolio, this is Teodosio, the head of our kitchens,” Escalus motioned to the aforementioned man. “He is a master of his craft. Teodosio, this is our new guest, Benvolio.”

“Greetings Benvolio,” Teodosio said. “Welcome home. My ovens are always hot so feel free if you are ever in need of anything to come to me.”

Benvolio nodded, appearing overwhelmed by the generosity. It was unusual. Teodosio was gruff by nature. It normally took him longer to warm up to new people. Benvolio was special however; everyone knew that, knew his story: the fallen star unjustly cast from heaven.

“Thank you. Teodosio.” Benvolio graciously said from his place on the settee.

“Is there anything else you will be needing from me, Your Highness?” Teodosio turned to address Escalus.

Escalus motioned in the negative. “No thank you, Teodosio. That will be all.”

Teodosio nodded to the Prince and made his exit.

Escalus turned to Benvolio, motioning for him to help himself first. Benvolio reached for a pastry piled high with strawberries.

“What say you, to the Capulet’s proposal?” Prince Escalus hated to resume their previous conversation, but it was necessary.

Benvolio paused midway through a bite of his pastry, frozen in surprised indecision. He swallowed nervously. “I will do what needs to be done.” He finally uttered with all the unease and anxiety of a gallows-man lead to the noose.
A day passed. A couple servants brought Benvolio some tomes on Greek Literature, which he greedily devoured from a primely placed window seat inside his main bedroom. Dinner had been brought to him in his room, a full service of courses. Adrianna had visited later and they spent some time discussing the Greek Literature Benvolio had read that afternoon.

Prince Escalus warned Benvolio at the end of their meeting that he had granted Tybalt leave to call on Benvolio the next day, five days after the events of the market square. Benvolio had nodded in understanding.

Now though, as the hour was approaching, Benvolio felt his calm desert him entirely.

Truth be told, he had no idea what to feel about entering into a courtship with Tybalt. The elder was near abouts seven years his senior. In all his previous dealings with the man, Tybalt had been haughty, condescending and combative. However, Benvolio had watched the man in dealings with people who were not Montagues. Tybalt positively doted on Juliet and his other young cousins. He was highly intelligent in his interactions with the Price and his uncle. He was honorable. He was also fairly attractive.

Tybalt was not a bad man.

Benvolio had to keep reminding himself of that fact. Every five minutes.

A knock sounded.

“Come in,” Benvolio called.

His reclined position on the settee gave him the perfect vantage point of Tybalt’s cautious entrance into the room.

“Greetings, sir Tybalt,” Benvolio called across the airy room.

“Good morrow to you, fair Benvolio,” Tybalt nodded respectfully.

“Please sit,” Benvolio motioned to the armchair perpendicular to his position, but Tybalt ignored it and instead settled on the settee, gently nudging Benvolio’s legs so he could sit closer.

Benvolio raised an eyebrow at the show of power but merely accepted the powerplay as part of their relationship.

“Tybalt. Welcome.”

“Thank you for allowing me to see you.” The handsome mischievous smirk was back, but this time Benvolio was relieved it lacked the cruelty so apparent at their last couple meetings.

“It seemed prudent to clear the air.” Benvolio shrugged with feigned nonchalance. “Especially if you intend to court me.”

“Indeed,” Tybalt’s smile sharpened like a shark. Then he glanced back at Benvolio, softening to a sort of gentle tenderness that felt very out of character for the Capulet. As odd as it was, Benvolio found that it only made the older man look even more handsome.

“I believe though, that we have another pressing matter to discuss first.”
“Yes?”

Tybalt paused shortly, his confidence dimming slightly as he bared his soul just a little. “I must beg your absolute pardon, Good Benvolio. For all the trouble and heartache that my actions have caused you.”

Benvolio did not answer for a long moment. He had to stop, to think about Tybalt’s actions. He could say time after time that he did not blame Tybalt, but the head and the heart were two different organs entirely.

“Why did you do it?” Benvolio needed to know. “What did you think you would gain, for disgracing me so?” His voice choked embarrassingly towards the end.

Tybalt appeared even more uncomfortable. Benvolio stifled his emotions, bottling them in until he could safely resume a calm demeanor.

“Empty words and emptier platitudes demand that I tell you it was not personal in any way. I do not hold any hatred for you personally. On the contrary, I find you delightfully intelligent and wondrously lovely.”

Benvolio could feel himself blush. “Thank you, sir Tybalt.”

“It is but the truth. Nevertheless, I cannot say that I was planning anything that night when you asked me to dance. At first I was highly offended, then greatly amused by your pluck. You have a sublime expression of resolve.” Benvolio’s face disrupted into an embarrassed frown at that, causing Tybalt to chuckle. “After we started dancing, I found that I was reluctant to let you go. Not only that, but the longer I held you, the more angry Mercutio got.”

“You did all this to anger Mercutio?” Benvolio demanded. He wasn’t even aware that Mercutio had been watching for that long.

“Aye.”

“You hate him so?”

“Offense not meant to the Prince, but I hold a great disaffection towards his cousin.”

“Because of his feud with you?”

“Because of his interference in a feud that is not his own. His honor is not tied in with our fighting. He pursues this violence almost for violence’s sake. Surely he did not need to interfere with my argument with Romeo in the square. It is foolish and foolhardy, not to mention arrogant of him to involve himself in things that do not concern him.”

“Mercutio is a brother in all but blood with Romeo; he believes any slight against Romeo is a slight against himself. All Romeo’s feuds are his feuds. All of Romeo’s battles are his battles. Is that so bad?” Benvolio countered. He did not realize it, but as he spoke he sat up further, almost leaning into Tybalt.

“Not by necessity, but there is a difference between supporting someone in an existing feud and starting a new one.”

Tybalt’s serious expression caused Benvolio to pause, considering that. He had to acknowledge some of the truth in Mercutio’s behaviour. Often the other man was the quickest to charge into a new fight.
“You speak without falsities,” Benvolio spoke softly. “Though I do admit it rankles to know that all this came about because you were trying to bait Mercutio.”

Tybalt gently put a hand under Benvolio’s chin, raising it so Benvolio was forced to meet Tybalt’s eyes, blue clashing with brown.

“That does not make you worth any less, dear Benvolio. You are worth more than you think you are, more than Mercutio’s remarks in the market I would be honored if you would accept my suit of courtship.”


It was all he could do to ignore that snide, cruel voice.

“I accept,” Benvolio pledged without giving himself time to doubt.

Tybalt broke into a lovely smile, faint but easily readable at this close distance.

“I am glad,” Tybalt brought Benvolio’s right hand up to his lips, a gesture that painfully reminded Benvolio of Romeo’s lovestruck awe of Juliet as he performed the same gesture not five days since.

Let the worst come to the worst. Let Mercutio see what course of events his actions caused. For this would not have happened at all if not for Mercutio’s interference.

Not that Benvolio could say he was completely ill at ease with this turn of events. Certainly it was not the path he would have chosen, but as Tybalt’s hand moved from Benvolio’s chin to his cheek, lightly stroking it in a tender gesture of affection, it was not altogether an unwelcome one.

The move to the Prince’s Palace made it harder for Romeo to sneak out to see his cousin. Before when he was being treated in the Benedictine infirmary, trips to that holy place were easy to excuse. However, being seen going in and out of the Prince’s sanctuary was much harder to explain away.

Miraculously, with magnificent self-control, Romeo had avoided violence towards his own kin in regards to Benvolio.

It helped that the general atmosphere that permeated the compound was an uneasy anxiety, wrought by the Prince’s uncharacteristic silence and Benvolio’s unknown condition.

It was a curious combination. No one liked that Benvolio had turned traitor for a Capulet, but at the same time, he had been well liked by all, always kind and polite, if quiet and contemplative. Everyone acknowledge and accepted his pacifist streak with the same way they accepted the cycles of the moon: it was nature and therefore could not be changed. Thus his supposed desertion was not as much out of character for him as it would have been for anyone else.

Coupled with that fact was that Benvolio’s condition was unknown. Romeo, for all he had been pestered, did not tell anyone Benvolio’s state of health. He could be severely injured for all any of them knew.

At its heart the situation could be summed up that nobody liked that Benvolio had turned traitor, but neither did they want him dead for it.

Which he very well could be. Romeo refused to tell them.
Romeo appreciated the irony of letting them stew in their own anxiety. It created a strange juxtaposition to his own cousin. Benvolio, abandoned by fate and left in the worst situation imaginable, had, to Romeo’s astonishment, shed the invisible weights of self-doubt and anxiety as the days wore on in the Benedictine Abbey. He positively brightened, his whole countenance improving day by day.

Nevertheless, it was rewarding to see that cooler heads prevailed. Romeo had no doubt that in the first hours after the events of the fight, every Montague was clamoring for Benvolio’s head on a pike for turning traitor. Now that the bloodlust had abated however, most people seemed to think banishment an apt punishment and decided to bury the matter entirely.

All except his father, Lord Montague.

Two days ago, following a summons from Prince Escalus, his father’s actions had radically changed. When before, the elder man had muttered curses under his breath, an occasional offhand nasty comment about the value of loyalty, Lord Montague transformed into a suspicious and secretive man. He often held meetings in his study with men Romeo knew to be part of his inner council.

His father also started making gentle inquiries towards Benvolio’s healthy. Romeo made a point not to hide his feelings of outrage and anger at the hasty decision. His father must have assumed, correctly, that Romeo was in contact with Benvolio.

Romeo refused all overtures of goodwill. He was quite thankful Mercutio had yet to show his face. All things considered, Romeo would probably break his pate across.

When the opportunity presented itself, a day after Benvolio had been moved, Romeo escaped the stifling atmosphere of the Montague compound and made his way to the Prince’s Palace. The men on duty must have been warned to expect him because they let him in without protest and even dispatched him a guard to led him through the winding corridors to Benvolio’s room.

Benvolio was sitting in a broad window seat in his bedroom, a bright airy space dominated by a truly spectacular four poster bed. A thick leather book held his cousin’s attention when Romeo entered, but his firm footsteps jolted Benvolio’s attention. The younger boy glanced up, his politely curious expression changing in an instant when he recognized his visitor.

“Romeo!” Benvolio called jubilantly. He put down his book and made to stand; Romeo was quick to wave him away, plopping down ungracefully next to him.

“Good cousin, I am glad you are well,” Benvolio continued.

“It is not me you should be worried about. Value yourself a little more, Benvolio,” Romeo marked. “You were stabbed less than a fortnight a ago.”

“I feel fine now.”

“Fine you say. What hast Friar Laurence said?”

“The Prince has provided his own healer. Master Elio says that I may start moving slowly, but prolonged movement is prohibited. My wound has closed, but any strenuous activity might open it up again. The danger of infection has all but past though.”

“Thank the Gods,” Romeo breathed out. “I am most grateful to the Prince. But tell me, what has happened with you? Lord Montague came home three days ago and all changed. What did the Prince say to him?”
Benvolio recounted what he knew of the conversation the Prince had had with Lord Montague.

“What a curious turn of events,” Romeo murmured. “That it explains much, however. My Lord Father is now concerned what others will think of him, as you are now proven innocent, meaning he disowned you on the word of someone who is not even kin. Tongues will wag.”

In the city of Verona, reputation was everything, especially when it came to the Montague’s rivalry with the Capulets. Disregarding their unattractive feud, both houses had been, up to this point, on even footing.

“It may just be worse than that,” Benvolio murmured. “I may have made a deal with the devil, so to speak.”

“Whatever do you mean?”

“I have agreed to a courting suit with Tybalt of the House Capulet.” Benvolio admitted.

Silence.

Romeo sat, mouth open wide enough to attract even the most inane of flying insects. Benvolio could not help the gentle chuckle that erupted out of him. “You seem shocked, cousin.”

“Shocked is a grave understatement, Benvolio,” Romeo cried out. “What were you thinking?”

“I was thinking how best to preserve our delicate balance, how to keep you and Juliet safe.” Benvolio argued back.

Romeo paused, aghast.

Benvolio was quick to follow up on that statement to reassure his cousin. “I mean it not in those distinct terms, Romeo. I merely meant that a union with the Capulets would give you and I some leeway when the inevitable happens.”

“Do not even think of trading away your-” Romeo started before Benvolio interrupted him.

“It is not that,” Benvolio stared out the window, unable to meet his cousin’s eyes. “Tybalt is… Tybalt. He is everything that Mercutio has described him as, King of Cats and all, but he is more than that. He is noble and just. Maybe he is not kind, but he does mean well.”

Romeo was still silent.

“Plus he is attractive,” Benvolio continued.

Romeo choked, sounding rather like a wind-bereft feline.

“No really,” Benvolio continued, all too aware of his cousin’s humorous reaction. “His eyes are deep brown, like the purest mahogany. His chin, so rugged, so—”

“Enough!” Romeo laughed. “Enough, Benvolio. Your mischief has been noted. Tybalt is a very good catch.”

Benvolio nodded, his good humor dissipating.

Romeo saw this and tried to think of something else to bring cheer. “How goes life in the palace? Has Adrianna absconded you yet?”
“Life has been grand,” Benvolio nodded to the room around him. “It is very kind of the Prince to house me in such luxury. I live as richly as any of the kings and queens of Europe. One of his servants graciously brought me these books to read. Think Romeo, a new book at my disposal any time I so wish it!” His face lit up, a sun’s rays in the gentle morning. Usually time and new frontiers of literature did not lend themselves to Benvolio’s desires in the Montague library. His voracious appetite ensured that new, intriguing books were scarce and had to be found after a great many searches through the shelves, prompting much complaining. Romeo himself had been a frequent and easy ear to which the subject was waxed with such enthusiasm and energy that he had taken to running the other way whenever he spied his cousin exiting the Montague library.

Romeo’s laughter echoed off the walls. “Your true happiness has been met, good cousin. Who knew it was so easy?”

“Jest as you will. At least Adrianna has been a delight, an eager match for a battle of wit and might. She suggested several titles for my perusal.”

“I am glad.” Romeo said. “I do worry about you here. So does the family, those that are brave enough to tell me so.”

“I am pleased to know I have not become a complete persona non grata.” Benvolio’s shy smile belied the true warmth that blossomed in his stomach.

“Nay, but least of all in the city of Verona. The Prince’s reputation has done everything but diminish once he brought you into his house. I am afeard for my lord father once it is revealed that his actions were unjust and made in irrational hatred.” Truly Romeo felt that everything that would come to his father was well deserved.

Silence.

“What news have you about Mercutio?” Benvolio suddenly asked, with a nervous twitch. Romeo knew his cousin well. His expression clearly said he did not really want to know but he had to know.

“In truth, dear cousin, I know not.”

“Romeo-”

“Nay, it is not to spare you at all. No one has heard any word of Mercutio since the Prince sent him to this Palace right after you were hurt. For honesty’s sake, I believed you would be the one to know.”

“Prince Escalus has not told me,” Benvolio admitted. “But I did not ask, preferring not to know. I will ask now.”

“Good.” Romeo agreed. It was better to resolve the situation. Clear as it was to both of them that Mercutio had not meant to stab Benvolio, cruel words had been said in pure malice. At the very least, he deserved to grovel at Benvolio’s heels for a suitable time.

Benvolio and Tybalt’s courtship was a slow one, hampered both by their past history and Benvolio’s injuries. With the Prince’s permission, Tybalt visited Benvolio many times in the next couple weeks, at both prearranged and spontaneous times, just to throw Benvolio off.

Benvolio was thankful in some ways for the constant Tybalt provided. Romeo’s visits were pleasant and necessary to keeping him sane, but Tybalt was the one who really brought life to his room. The Capulet’s visits were never boring and Benvolio found that when he wasn’t the recipient of Tybalt’s
scathing comments, many of them were quite witty and humorous.

With every day his injuries improved, until finally, a week and a half after being injured, Benvolio was granted leave by the Prince’s personal physician to begin to move and get up. Benvolio celebrated that freedom by walking to the library by himself. He exchanged his Ancient Greek books for a thick volume on the origin myths of constellation names and settled into a plush, gilded armchair for a long read.

That was where the Prince found him an hour later, still absorbed in the book. He had reached the story of Aquila the eagle and Aquarius the waterbearer, which made him blush, a too noticeable tell, as the Prince was all too happy to point out.

“Pleasant reading?”

Benvolio tried to surreptitiously slide the title out of view, while beginning to rise.

The Prince waved off the obligatory bow.

“An apt tale, for your situation,” Escalus commented with what would be called a smirk on someone less royal and dignified. Benvolio was finding himself more knowledgeable on the Prince’s mannerisms, a skill which served him well as their friendship grew.

Suitably embarrassed, Benvolio gave up the effort to distract the Prince from his reading. “Not completely relevant as I doubt Tybalt and Lord Capulet wish to abscond with my person. That is, I would certainly hope not.”

Prince Escalus raised an eyebrow, taking the chair across from Benvolio. “I would rest easy in the knowledge that neither party have the desire to turn themselves into giant eagle in the effort to kidnap you. That does not mean that they do not wish to have power over you.”

“In this situation, who does not wish power over me?” Benvolio replied, voice calm with but a hint of steel. “Surely your popularity has not suffered since I have become a ward of you house. I am certain mine uncle, as soon as he concedes defeat and admits the to his mistake, will see a negative reaction in others’ eyes. My injury and unbalanced situation is the most intriguing event to happen in the last few years, even more noteworthy than Lady Prunella’s elopement with the candlemaker’s daughter.”

“Quite a scandal, that was, but I concede defeat on your other points. And I also acknowledge that you are well equipped to deal with whatever chicanery and mischief comes your way. In a battle of wits, you Benvolio, are a champion.”

“Thank you, your highness,” Benvolio nodded with satisfaction. Although his self-confidence lacked in other areas, wits and verbal jousts was one area where he knew he could cross swords with anyone. “However, I have another pressing matter, if you will permit me?”

It was time to speak of Mercutio.

“Yes, of course, Benvolio. What matters trouble you so?”

“Your cousin, Mercutio, your highness. You have not spoken of him since that first day and I find I am… curious, to know his situation,” Benvolio admitted, speaking as delicately as possibly. It hurt him to talk this way of his friend, or maybe former friend? If that was indeed the case, if Mercutio’s anger had severed all ties with the former Montague, Benvolio would be quite upset. As it was he was still hurt by the other man’s words, but in his heart he still wished to repair some of their shattered friendship.
“Ah, you do ask the difficult questions, do you not, Benvolio?” Prince Escalus said in a morose voice.

“I am sorry, my Prince.”

“The shame is not yours to bear. It is my cousin, who has thus far not acquitted himself of this burden. He refuses, caring it like an oxen carries a plough, dragging it across fields of shame and guilt. He has not left his room since he returned that first day. I confess I am not eager to forgive him either and have had but one conversation with him, to assure him of your survival and to confine him to the Palace grounds until I decided upon a just punishment.”

Benvolio reflected on that. Truthfully, he knew not what to make of Mercutio and the for the moment, that goal was solved quite handily.

“Thank you for telling me, Prince Escalus.”

“That information does come with an addendum, young Benvolio. Eventually, something needs to happen; I trust I can depend on you to help me decide on a fitting punishment when the time comes?”

“I will try, my Prince.”

“Very well then. Onto better matters.”

Here Escalus looked like the cat that got both the cream and the canary as a double feast. “I am holding a feast here at the Palace in two weeks. You will attend as the guest of honor. It is there I hope to put into motion Romeo and Lady Juliet’s courtship. Also Tybalt and your own’s as well.”

“The Capulets will all be invited?” Benvolio inquired.

“And the Montagues will not,” Escalus finished Benvolio’s chain of thought. “Minus Romeo of course. You will present him to Lord Capulet as your only ally.”

“Implied that he and I come together, like Artemis and Apollo, not one without the other.” It was Benvolio’s turn to finish the Prince’s statement.

“Exactly. Romeo will request a dance from Juliet and will not leave her side for the rest of the feast. I have already alerted mine cousin, Paris, to the situation. He has pledged to gently remove himself from the suit with Lady Juliet. Leaving the way clear for Lord Capulet to arrange a marriage that is already enacted.”

“Lord Montague will never agree.” Benvolio had to point out his uncle’s stubbornness.

“Lord Montague will not have a choice.” Prince Escalus’ smile was precise and biting in its ruthlessness. He tented his fingers together, contemplative and utterly dangerous. “Unless he wants shame and disgrace to forever follow his stead. I can be unhappy when I want to. This feud has carried on for far too long. I now have a golden opportunity to end it. I plan to take full advantage of it.”

“I will not disagree with you in that respect, my Prince,” Benvolio demurred. “And the plan is a solid one.
The Party

The affair launched by the Prince to reintroduce Benvolio to Verona’s elite was as marvelous a spectacle as Benvolio had ever seen in his life. No expense was spared and everyone was invited, sans the Montague House in a notable gesture.

The Prince, beholden to no one, took every opportunity to bedeck and bedazzle his home, surely putting to shame even the finery of Mount Olympus.

Benvolio, now part of the Prince’s estate, was treated much the same. Two servants had swept into his room four mornings after the Prince told him of the party. Both had obviously been given detailed, merciless instructions by the Prince and so took no protests from Benvolio as he tried to reason his way out of their clutches.

They very politely dragged him to meet with Lorenzo, a tailor of the greatest repute in all of Verona. Benvolio had met the man in passing when he had been commissioned to build a suit for Lord Montague. Lorenzo was a short, passionate man, prone to wild gesticulations and lightning speed words.

“Benvolio, my dear boy,” he started off with his usual energy when Benvolio was led into the spare drawing room Prince Escalus had Lorenzo’s equipment set up.

“Master Lorenzo,” Benvolio greeted with a smile. “It is good to see you.”

“I should be the one saying that to you, shouldn’t I?” Lorenzo said. “Nasty business, very nasty indeed. Couldn’t believe it when I first heard it. To think, Lord Montague believed all that nonsense. I’m glad the Prince stepped up. Still, the streets have never been quieter.”

“Indeed, Master Lorenzo. Thank you for your vote of confidence.”

“Pah, my boy. When you’re as old as I am and have seen as many things as I have, you get a sense.” Never mind that Lorenzo was barely older than Benvolio’s uncle, a robust 45. Still, Benvolio humored the master tailor, nodding with appropriate levity.

“Now the Prince has commissioned me to build you several suits, one for the party I understand he is throwing in several weeks. From your skin tone, I brought a handful of fabric samples to look at and of course we can begin to discuss style as well.”

A handful was a grave understatement. Lorenzo’s assistant, hitherto unnoticed in the corner, sprang forth with the same passion as his master and revealed a veritable mountain of fabric samples, ranging from pale cream to bright lavender. Benvolio abhorred the lavender on site.

The next hour and a half was spent bargaining with Master Lorenzo on color and style. The man’s preferences were what Benvolio might call contradictory to his own muted style and so it was a heavy compromise between the two of them to find several suit styles that both parties agreed on. Nevertheless, at the end of their time together, the tailor and his assistant, who seemed to have multiplied into three assistants over the course of the time, returned to his shop with firm plans for four suits for Benvolio as well as Benvolio’s measurements.

They scheduled a fitting five days from the day’s date. Benvolio felt confident that he could survive further encounters with the man, now that he knew when and how to bargain and the things Master Lorenzo would and would not compromise on.
The week before Prince Escalus’ feast saw many plots in many households. Benvolio would only know of some of these after the fact, but most happened in the similar ways he and the Prince had predicted.

“Blast and damnation,” came one early morning from Lord Capulet, who had finished going through the morning’s missives after breaking his fast at the semi-formal dining room the intimate family used for early meals.

“What troubles you so, husband dear?” Lady Capulet asked quizzically. She, Juliet, and Tybalt were the only other family members in attendance, each involved in their own meals until Lord Capulet’s exclamation drew them forth.

“Lord Paris, that’s what,” the lord of the house grumbled, heedful of his daughter and wife’s presence. “He has wrote to me that some of his business ventures are pulling him away from Verona for some time. Given that, he does not feel taking a wife at this time would be in his best interests. ‘Revisit the prospect at a later time’ indeed.” He politely sneered that last bit.

Juliet gasped, which in turn caused Lady Capulet to focus her attention on her daughter. “Oh, my dear Juliet. Do not take heart. This is a minor set back. We will still find you a match of unparalleled standing, an equal to you.”

Juliet appeared to fortify. “Of course, mother. I trust your and my lord father’s judgement. I am certain Lord Paris’ did this both for his benefit and my own.”

“All will be well, daughter,” Lord Capulet contributed. His face softened for his only child, a beautiful daughter. As much as he would have prefered a son, Juliet was still his pride and joy. Secretly he was glad of the opportunity to hold onto her a bit longer, sentimental though the notion was.

Tybalt leaned forward to whisper into the air with faux-secrecy, “Clearly Lord Paris was not at all worthy of my baby cousin. His loss.”

“I am not a baby, cousin Tybalt,” Juliet complained with the petulance inherent of all teenaged females. “I am nearly fourteen years old.” She huffed, appearing to resist any other unlady-like urges that her mother had no doubt tried to drill out of her. Lord Capulet covered an indulgent smile with a well timed coughed, noticing Tybalt doing the same off to the side.

“I apologize, Lady Juliet,” Tybalt teased with false severity. “I can see now that you are the very picture of lady-like composure and elegance.”

Juliet huffed again, but did not return the jest, no doubt aware of her mother’s severe hawk-like eyes watching her every move. She passively returned to her meal.

Further talk of Lord Paris’ slight was unspokenly avoided until the ladies exited. Lady Capulet and Juliet finished breaking their fasts in the return of banal, companionable chatter. The two took their leave. Juliet had her morning lessons and Lady Capulet was overseeing the refurbishment of a large suite in the southern end of the Capulet Compound.

Just before the door shut, when Lady Capulet was already out the door, Juliet turned and fixed her cousin with a horribly un-ladylike expression, face distended, eyes narrowed and tongue out. Both men valiantly held in their chuckles until the young girl left and the door slide solidly shut behind her.

Tybalt could hold it in no longer; he guffawed heavily. Lord Capulet joined him in his mirth. “She is
“your daughter, my Lord.” Tybalt said.

“Aye, that she is. And I wish him well that will marry her. She will be a handful.”

“Now that Paris has denied you?”

“Aye, and what a curious case that is. I could have sworn the suit well and good, profitable to both and of a fitting rank. Juliet is young, true, but no more younger than any of the other girls. Paris swore he was in no hurry to acquire an heir so she would have time to grow more comfortable with wifely duties.”

“And Lord Paris is a man of upright standing.” Tybalt contributed. He was more acquainted with the Lord than his uncle; Paris was closer to Tybalt’s age, a mere 26 to his 24 so the two had often interacted at numerous social functions over the years. “Maybe too upright.”

“What mean you by this, nephew?” Lord Capulet had heard the change of tone in his nephew’s voice in that last phrase.

“Paris is very honorable. It is conceivable he heard of Juliet’s hesitancy regarding this marriage, her constant visits to Friar Laurence, and decided to postpone the marriage for her sake.”

Lord Capulet did not know the younger Lord as well as his nephew but could not find fault in that; Juliet’s visits to Friar Laurence had not been secret.

“It is plausible. I will ask him in person at Prince Escalus’ event this week. Speaking of that, how goes your courting with young, Benvolio?” Lord Capulet was curious to know the headway his nephew was making with his new love interest. He had noticed the younger man’s absences over the last week. Tybalt had been gone almost every day, from times ranging from a hour to almost three hours.

“It is going most well, my Lord. Benvolio is a jewel, a star, hidden behind a mask of pleasant pacifism. I cannot believe the Montagues simply threw him away.”

“As some might say, their loss is our gain.” Lord Capulet took a moment to study Tybalt, a sly smile creeping onto his face. “I had wondered why you tolerated his presence at our gathering. It is very curious that you feel so affectionately for this young one.”

“He is desirable.” Tybalt was comfortable enough with himself and his uncle to admit the truth in those words. Perhaps earlier he might not have, but at this turn of events, after spending these past few weeks with the boy, truth was the best healer. “In another life, if he had not been a Montague, I might have been tempted to bed him.”

“Fate does work in mysterious ways, does it not? Now he is no longer a Montague. The chance of you bedding him is more and more likely.”

Already Tybalt could feel the beginnings of his uncle’s shrewd mind coming to life, a morning glory feeling the first beams of dawn, uncoiling like a spring to reveal harsh intelligence and calculating business sense. “I noticed you had your lady wife prepare that suite in the southern quadrant. Are not those rooms used for a newly married couple?”

“They are indeed, nephew. You do miss nothing, do you not? But think of the irony, my dear nephew, if Benvolio was to be vindicated of the crimes against him? The Montagues would be disgraced, publicly humiliated and shamed for banishing an innocent youth of 17, whom even the Prince knows to be of sound character. Naturally the Capulets would step in to lend a hand to the poor boy, now alone in the world. What better way than to see him wed to sir Tybalt, nephew to
Lady and Lord Capulet, not of the direct Capulet family but held in high esteem by everyone?

“Thus proving to Prince Escalus and the citizenry which House is better,” Tybalt finished for his uncle. The plan was genius. It effectively killed two birds with one stone; the first stone was offering Benvolio recompense for their part in his misfortune and the second was swaying public opinion heavily in their favor in terms of their feud with the Montagues.

“Indeed. This is the plan we have to enact, dear nephew. Starting at the feast in one week. It is your job to sway public opinion. No one has made up their minds as to yours and Benvolio’s actual relationship. Most believe Mercutio spoke out of turn. Enhance that and then strike with your suit.”

“By enhance that, I assume you mean to make a show of an apology?” Tybalt wondered.

“Precisely. Loud, obvious, everything to draw attention. Pride will not be your friend in this endeavour, dear Tybalt.” Lord Capulet stated. His nephew would have to swallow his most potent attribute.”

“I understand, my Lord.” Tybalt agreed. “Have no fear, by the end of the night, no one in Verona will have cause to doubt the Montague’s error, or Benvolio’s and my pending nuptials.”

This party started off so much like the last one, with Benvolio lurking in the corners, desperately keeping an eye out for his cousin.

The Prince’s plan, to subtly introduce Romeo as intent to Juliet’s affections, had not started, but Benvolio could not help but worry for his cousin. Romeo and Juliet’s union had started off in the most unusual of manners. Benvolio knew that they had kept in constant communication with notes being passed back and forth with Friar Laurence as the mediator. Several more visits had been arranged as well, Juliet played off the story that she went to Friar Laurence for council about Lord Paris’ suit. Time would tell if they could keep up the plot until they could break the news to their families.

The corner was not as welcoming as it once was; soon Prince Escalus made overtures to bid him to greet the arriving guests. With a sigh, Benvolio straightened his new suit, making sure there were no creases or wrinkles in it, and confidently strode over the greet the arriving throng.

He played proficiently amongst the masses, accepting well wishes and cautious disdain with equal grace. The line was filled with many people he had met before, the gentry and the wealthier businessmen and their spouses and associated progeny.

Romeo entered early, noticeably the only Montague in attendance. His welcome was warm and abundant, the Prince and Princess fawned over him for a significant amount of time.

“Thank you for coming, young Montague. I know Benvolio is grateful for your continued support,” Prince Escalus accepted Romeo’s bow and handshake with a firm and easy smile.

“Dear cousin, it is good to see you,” Romeo apparently was not to be outdone in the showmanship competition, for his greeting was as loud and verbose as his hosts’. “I would never let mine lord father’s false claims separate us. True family must stand by each other, not with outsiders.”

“You are most welcome, Romeo,” Benvolio murmured with some sense of embarrassment at Romeo’s loud words. His sense of self still ached at the very loud and very public display his life had become of late.

As the feast picked up, the Capulet party made their entrance. Lord Capulet led the pack, followed
by his wife, Lady Capulet, Juliet, Tybalt, and the same elders that had occupied Lord Capulet’s dias with him the night of the first masquerade. This time the expressions they fixed Benvolio with were much more welcome.

“Lord Capulet. I am pleased to you and yours could attend the festivities,” Prince Escalus greeted the lord.

“My Prince, thank you for inviting us to your party and into your lovely home,” Lord Capulet responded back, bowing slightly in respect. Behind him, the other Capulets followed suit, Juliet and Lady Capulet curtseyng while the other men bowed. “May I present my wife, Lady Capulet, my daughter Juliet, mine brothers, Sir Arturo and Sir Giraldo, and mine uncles, Sir Sebastian and Sir Marco. And of course, mine nephew Tybalt.”

“Gentlemen and ladies, welcome to my home,” the Prince responded in kind, introducing his wife and then turning to Benvolio. “This, as I am sure you are aware, is Benvolio, my ward.”

Benvolio bowed low to Lord Capulet, suddenly reminded of the last time he had come face to face with this group of men. The situation had been the same, at a party quite like this, but hopefully the outcome would be different.

The probabilities of that were positive. Instead of the wary glances and angry scowls, Lord Capulet’s council actually greeted him personally, each one introducing themselves and apologizing for the events of the last few weeks. Benvolio was overwhelmed by their generosity and kindness, false and for show they might be.

Juliet came next, demurely curtseying her greeting. “I am pleased you are well, Benvolio.”

“Thank you, Lady Juliet,” he responded in kind, bowing once more before taking her hand and kissing it. “Might I say you are looking radiant this evening?”

“You may say so and I would heartily welcome the compliment,” she smiled brightly, knowing he spoke in truth. Romeo had spent quite a bit of time waxing poetry to his cousin when they would meet or through the words they would write to each other, so Juliet was eager to converse more with this young man, for longer than the hour they had had on the day Benvolio had been injured.

Juliet walked on and finally Benvolio came face to face with Tybalt. He smiled softly at the man but was confused when Tybalt’s somber expression did not brighten. Common pleasantries and welcomes were established in stilted formality. Benvolio was just beginning to feel a sliver of hurt when Tybalt took his hand.

“Good Benvolio, I find I have some words to say to you, good words, pleasing words, but meaningless in the grand scheme of things.”

“Then why waste them on me?” Benvolio tilted his head, puzzled by the unusual turn of phrase from Tybalt.

“I find them completely necessary for you, you are their only audience. May I find you later to give them to you?” Tybalt did not let go of Benvolio’s hand, instead holding it tighter.

“Aye, you have my permission.”

“Thank you for your gracious kindness.”

The unusual spectacle, prolonged by Tybalt’s plea, caught the attention of almost everyone in the room, making sure that the words meant only for Benvolio would in truth be a farce, a play meant for
the audience rather than the actors acting it out.

The Capulets made a final bid of thanks and greetings before drifting off, leaving the next set of guests to take their place. Benvolio, still distracted by Tybalt’s odd behaviour went through the motions, not paying attention to whose personage he was being introduced to, beyond a brief glance to match face to name.

The Prince, noticing Benvolio’s frown, bent over to whisper in his ear in a lull in arrivals, “It appears there will be quite the gossip chain around you and Tybalt already, my young ward.”

“Aye, my Prince. Though I cannot for the life of me whether it be good or evil.”

Thankful for the medical excuse that granted him a reprieve from the constant dancing, Benvolio slunk off the dance floor after a single set with Adrianna. He maneuvered through the crowd of people, politely interacting with those he should, all the while trying to evade and dodge those that would ask him for a dance. His dance card had never been more sought after, which created a problem for his normally introverted and shy attitude.

He made it to the balcony, breathing in the cool night air. The fog receded from his mind some.

A handful of other couples leisurely walked the balustrade. Their casual yet purposeful avoidance of him made it clear they knew who he was and were waiting for something interesting to happen.

They were not disappointed.

The light from the party bleed through the windows, casting a muted glow onto the balcony outside. Benvolio could feel its warmth lingering, a startling juxtaposition between that and the breeze that even now threatened to send shivers down his spine.

Benvolio walked to the edge of the balcony, which overlooked the River Adige. The river was calm, the moon reflecting off its gently moving waters.

So caught up in the moment, Benvolio did not hear the noiseless shoes of his visitor. Only when a polite cough sounded behind him did he spin round, coming face to face with Tybalt of the House Capulet.

“Sir Tybalt,” Benvolio greeted, unsure for the first time in several weeks of his standing with this austere and solemn man.

“Good Benvolio,” Tybalt replied in kind. “It is a kindness you allowing me to see you this way. Tis unusual this I know, but I find the words I must say to you are for you and you alone.”

“Speak then, Tybalt,” Benvolio urged. “For now is as good a time as any and we have relative privacy here, while all else are preoccupied by the night’s festivities.”

Tybalt made an uncharacteristic production of looking around at his settings before refocusing on Benvolio. “My fair Benvolio, I fear I had done you a grave insult. It was not my intention that day at the market that you should be banish’d. Neither was it my intention at all that we should be seen as mates by your family.”

“Mates indeed,” Benvolio agreed, thinking of Tybalt’s current suit of courtship.

“I only responded to your offer of a dance to take revenge upon your family, to play with and twist your pretty words, while you had only offered to save thine cousin from my anger. It is to my shame
now that Mercutio saw and misunderstood as such. You should be lauded for your loyalty to your cousin, not cast out amongst the gutter.”

“I thank you for your kindness,” Benvolio helplessly said, back turned. “But I cannot help but question what your true intention is?”

“My true intention is pure, in the name of the Good Lord above. I hold a part of the guilt of the events that have led to your misfortune. For all that the Prince has taken in you in now, your future is still bleak, banish’d as you are from the Montague Clan.”

“Aye, that is true enough,” the solemn and snooty tone did much to convey Benvolio’s feeling about Tybalt bringing up the acrid wound.

“I wish to help rectify my mistake,” Tybalt continued on boldly, as though he did not hear Benvolio’s less than happy tone.

“How?” Benvolio said bluntly, growing tired of this show. He had realized its purposes not long after Tybalt started speaking, louder than normal to carry to all those watching in dark and unseen vantage points.

“I, Tybalt of the Capulet Clan, do hereby offer a suit of courtship to you, Benvolio, ward of Prince Escalus. With a union as the eventual goal, I promise to cherish and protect you, to honor and respect you, til death do us part.”

Benvolio could do no more than gap like a stunned fish. This had been a far more expressive and loud proposal than the solemn and calculated proposal that day in Benvolio’s quarters but for all the inflated pomp that Benvolio could feel surrounding this proposal, he also had a much better feel for the surly Capulet after their weeks of slow courtship. This proposal and promise was heartfelt and true, no matter the unfortunate situation.

Thus it was no great difficulty for Benvolio to say to the stunned night air on the balcony, “I accept with a condition, sir Tybalt.”

After all, he could not be seen as too easy either.

“Name it thus.”

“My situation is bleak, this truth you do speak. However, I am not so desperate as to enter into a union with a man that hates me. I will grant you one full cycle of the moon to prove your intentions honest and your dedication without flag or fail.”

“I accept,” Tybalt declared with all solemnity.

“Well then,” Benvolio announced. “Our deal is struck.”

“Fantastic,” Tybalt said with a pleased, feline grace. He then lost no time in sweeping the younger man into a possessive, heated kiss. Benvolio thought about resisting, but was quickly distracted by Tybalt’s teeth gently nibbling on his lower lip, causing the younger man to gasp and open his mouth. Tybalt took advantage and slipped his questing tongue into the open mouth. All coherent thought fled from Benvolio’s brain as a pleasurable warmth spread through his veins, Tybalt’s careful and tender overtures hesitantly reciprocated as the pleasure built.

Benvolio gasped again as Tybalt pulled away just as quickly as he had began. Cheeks flushed, lips wet and bruised, Benvolio was sure he looked a sight for any who had been watching Tybalt’s carefully orchestrated ploy.
“I look forward to getting to know you better,” Tybalt said with a bow. He walked jauntily back across the balustrade to the open doors of the ballroom and slipped back into the crowd, leaving Benvolio alone and shivering.

This was either not going to end well, or it would end beautifully.

Tongues did indeed wag the night of the party. The juicy gossip of Tybalt apology and offer spread faster than a wildfire through drought-ridden fields.

However in another corner of the party, events were also in motion. Benvolio slipped back into the party after calming himself on the outdoor balcony, with the intention of finding his cousin. Romeo stood along the outskirts of the dance floor, surreptitiously watching the Capulet party, waiting for his opening. Benvolio joined him with grace, though still trying to avoid people’s stares and whispers.

“Greetings, dear cousin.”

“Greetings indeed, Benvolio,” Romeo quirked an eyebrow. “You will never guess the most fascinating gossip that has been spreading through the crowd. It seems you are now in suit with Tybalt of the Capulets, sealed with a particularly naughty kiss.”

Benvolio tried valiantly to stem the blush he could feel rising, but from Romeo’s smug, self-satisfied smile, he knew he was not entirely victorious.

“Aye, that I did,” Benvolio mustered as much dignity as he could, wearing it like a billowing cloak.

“Congratulations are in order then, Benvolio. Soon you will join the ranks of the wedded, a kept man, with all the pleasures that are inherent in matrimony.”

Romeo’s tone implied exactly what kind of pleasures he was thinking of, making Benvolio blush yet again. Pleasures of the flesh were not completely foreign to the former Montague, but Tybalt’s possessive kiss and lingering eyes had put a face and an urgency to his thoughts, whereas before all that had existed was defined by faceless hands and repetitive self-pleasure.

“Speaking of pleasure, Romeo, it looks as though your wife could benefit from your company,” Benvolio pointed over to the neighboring party. Juliet stood restless amongst her father and the other Capulet elders, looking longingly at the dance floor. She apparently had been kept confined to her parents’ presence, their formidable countenances keeping all would-be dance partners at bay. To Benvolio’s consternation, Tybalt also stood with the group.

Romeo brightened slightly, “And now that you are here, dear cousin, I have cause to approach them.” He seized Benvolio by the elbow, dragging him in such a way to look natural from an outsider viewer’s perspective.

Slowing as they approached the Capulets, so as not to arouse suspicion, Romeo cast a charming smile at his lady wife. Benvolio smirked at his cousin’s behaviour.

“Lord Capulet,” Benvolio greeted the party. “Lady Capulet. Sirs Arturo, Giraldo, Sebastian, and Marco. Lady Juliet.” He courteously nodded in greeting to all the men and kissed the knuckles of each ladies’ hands. “Tybalt,” Benvolio said, much less courteously to his former tormentor. He was aggrieved at Tybalt’s latest power play and would not let the older man forget it.

“Young Benvolio,” Lord Capulet nodded in return.
Benvolio took the opportunity.

“May I present to you my cousin, Romeo of the House Montague.” The emphasis on the word cousin told everyone that Romeo had defied his father’s orders, still claiming kinship even when none was said to be had.

Romeo did not miss the opportunity either. He swept into a low bow, much lower than any other Montagues had made to their enemy in recent memory. “Lord Capulet, please allow me to sincerely apologise for trespassing on your masquerade a fortnight ago. ‘Twas childish, immature, and disrespectful of you and your house. It will not happen again.”

Romeo stayed bowed in a gesture of submission. Benvolio had never seen his cousin this respectful to anyone but he knew it was because Romeo wanted to make a good impression on his new father-in-law. As much as Romeo and Juliet had disrespected their own families by wedding in secret, Benvolio knew that Juliet still loved the Capulets with all her heart. Romeo’s opinions on the Montagues were a bit more muddled, still fuming from Benvolio’s unfair banishment, but Benvolio knew that Romeo respected Juliet’s feelings about her family and wanted to honor that.

Lord Capulet spent a long moment evaluating the offering, his beady, intelligent eyes picking up every facet of Romeo’s being. Movement paused, all in the party stuck on the battle of willings occurring right before their eyes.

“You are forgiven,” Lord Capulet finally spoke. The tension drained out of Romeo’s youthful body; he stood with a cautious smile.

“Thank you, Lord Capulet.” Romeo then address the rest of the Capulet party, going through and greeting each one individually. Juliet was his last stop and his eyes lingered on hers with a silence wanting, soft, affectionate, and loving. Though theirs had started as a marriage of whirlwind youthfulness and romantic declarations, these past weeks had taught the lovers that marriage was more than that. It was respect and kindness and affection and responsibility to both your spouse but also your own community. Perhaps Juliet would succeed in taming Romeo’s supernova, not getting burned like all others before her had.

Romeo broke their spell, introducing himself with a kind smile.

“And I hope, Lady Juliet, that you might save me one dance this night,” he ended his introduction playfully.

Juliet cast a shy glance at her parents. Lady Capulet’s face gave away nothing, but Lord Capulet nodded his tacit approval.

“I would be honored, Romeo of the Montagues.” She said in a strong voice.

Later, after the hour chimed the lateness of the night by the lack of bells as the new hour turned, the party wound down slowly. Guests trickled out into the courtyard where their carriages awaited in pairs or groups, their colorful gowns and suits muted now in the dull moonlight of the sliver of a waning moon.

Benvolio noticed this from the periphery. After successfully integrating Romeo with the Capulets, Benvolio had made his excuses so as to avoid Tybalt’s challenging smirk. It was more a strategic retreat, Benvolio assured himself.

Although loathe to do it, Benvolio rejoined with the Prince, who was now in the very thick of things,
and went to work helping bolster the image that the Prince was trying to spread. Since neither violence nor harsh punishment could end the Montague and Capulet feud, maybe politics could.

The rest of the evening Benvolio spent on and off the dance floor, talking to people about any and everything, but most of all the futility of the feud. He brought his own experiences into it, as many people were curious about the true story and chain of events that had happened. It was a nice reminder that the entire city of Verona was not defined by this ill will. Plenty of other nobles and wealthy merchants agreed with his position that the feud was bad for everyone. Still, they, like him, had considered it but nature, irrefutable. Events of late had showed all of them that change was in the air.

Now he stood among the emptying dance floor. His last dance partner had left him, beckoned away by the rest of his party that were heading to their carriage. Benvolio waved his partner off with a gracious smile.

Only three couples still danced to the band’s graceful waltz. Lord and Lady Capulet danced with an easy elegance that only couples extremely familiar with their partner could achieve. Another pair was a textile merchant and his wife whom Benvolio had been introduced to earlier that night. The last was Romeo and Juliet.

His cousin had absconded with Juliet under the tacit approval of her father some hours since, but had not relinquished grip yet. Even after being pulled away by questing singles, the two drifted together time and time again, like the earth and the moon, continually orbiting each other. Theirs was a dance of youthful eagerness and kittenish affection. Playful, energetic, and bouncing, they bobbed in and out of each other’s space, laughing at mis-steps and successes alike.

“Rather adorable, are they not?” A familiar voice interrupted his chain of thought, pulling him out of Romeo’s world. Tybalt had, hitherto unnoticed, sidled up to stand by Benvolio’s side.

“A Montague, with your young and impressionable cousin? Surely you thirst for vengeance even now?” Benvolio arched an eyebrow. This was certainly a turnaround from the last time Benvolio had been at a dance with the ‘King of Cats’.

“Ah, but he not a Montague. He is your cousin. And anyone that counts himself among your kin is sure to be worth notice,” Tybalt pointed out.

“He is still a Montague.”

“And Juliet has never been happier.” Juliet’s smile lit up the room, a shining jewel amongst harsh igneous rock, as Romeo lifted her up for an ariel spin. She giggled, a chiming laugh that rang throughout the ballroom. Romeo’s answering bright laughter echoed hers. Together the two lost themselves in their joyful dance, while most of those still left in the ballroom turned to look at the innocent scene.

“Neither has Romeo,” Benvolio admitted quietly.

“Fate certainly has worked in mysterious ways, this last fortnight. To think, a Montague with a Capulet.”

“Times are changing.” Benvolio said in a soft but sure voice. It might have taken nothing less than his exile, but no one of his kindred would die or be banished because of an antiquated feud.

“Aye,” Tybalt seemed willing enough to agree with that statement, an act which immediately put Benvolio on alert. Tybalt’s mischievous grin was the only thing to warn Benvolio and even that sign
did not come quick enough. Tybalt lunged towards Benvolio, pinning him in a warm hold and dragged him out onto the dance floor.

“Tybalt!”

“Calm down, little one. Dancing never hurt anyone.” Tybalt loosened his hold slightly, moving them into an acceptable dancing position, still closer together than was technically socially acceptable. The band had just struck up a new tune, a slower waltz.

Tybalt took advantage of the slow tempo, pressing every inch of his body against Benvolio’s that he could reach, dragging a delicious feeling from the younger man. Benvolio flushed, which Tybalt noticed quickly and smirked in pleasure.

That smirk brought back unwelcome memories, of that dangerous night when they danced for the first time.

Tybalt quickly noticed the change in his partner’s attitude and his solemn expression. “Ah, Benvolio, do not think of that.”

“How can I not? It will always be something between us, your uncaring, vicious actions.”

“Which I have apologized for,” Tybalt pointed out with a raised eyebrow, as though daring Benvolio to go back on his word.

“Aye, and I have accepted.”

“So in the spirit of peace between Montagues and Capulets, let us make new memories. Relax. Enjoy the dance. You are a formidable dance partner.” Tybalt launched the two of them back into rhythm with a fervor. Benvolio relented to himself that it would be fruitless to keep arguing the same points. He let himself be led, as the music began to pick up into a faster, lively tune.

Like the last time, Benvolio found he was evenly matched with his dance partner, and they made an elegant and well coordinated couple.

The music started to pick up again and Benvolio met Tybalt’s challenging expression with a smirk of his own. Tybalt let out a barking laugh and picked up the pace once again. Soon they lost track of the room around them, only involved in the music and the movements of the dance. Though they were not paying attention to anyone else, everyone else was paying attention to them. The other couples had deserted the floor when it was clear the band was playing especially for the two men.

The dance was lively and furious. It had turned into a competition, with Tybalt and Benvolio playfully competing to see who could go faster. The music reflected that as the musicians naturally sped up. They moved faster and faster, furiously turning, twisting and moving both arms and legs.

Then the music stopped.

The jolting stop sent the two dancers spinning away from one another. They had meant to grab hands, switching from a fast counter-clockwise circle to a stalled foot action; however they missed each other's’ hands in surprise when the music stopped and thus spun out. Benvolio accidentally tripped as he spun, landing with a plop on the floor. Tybalt caught himself miraculously but teetered as his vision spun.

There was a ringing silence as those still left in the hall recovered from the sudden removal of the music. It was broken as Benvolio broke out in a fit of giggles, finally taking inventory of his place on the floor. Tybalt, after he could see straight, joined in. Romeo and Juliet were quick to follow and
even the Prince joined in, clapping in jest at the rather ludicrous performance.

All others left in the room also joined in. The atmosphere was light and relaxed. Benvolio graciously accepted Romeo’s hand to stand up. He was still laughing, free and happy. “I thank you, sir Tybalt, for such an entertaining dance.”

“The pleasure is all mine, Benvolio,” Tybalt said, returning to Benvolio’s side. “See, it is not too hard to make new memories.”

Benvolio tried very hard to be miffed at Tybalt but… “You really like to win, do you not?” Benvolio eyed him with resigned amusement.

“My darling, I love to win.” Tybalt purred.

Somehow Benvolio knew that remarked signaled a new battle between the two about Tybalt’s new suit. It was not a battle that Benvolio was anxious to fight, for he knew he would lose. It was only a matter of time.

Still, that did not mean Benvolio could not make Tybalt earn the victory.

The effects of that night had far reaching consequences. Tybalt had done his task well, swaying all those to attended, Verona was soon of the mind that Benvolio’s banishment was unjust and uncouth, bringing the Montague’s status to an all time low.

Romeo’s galant, if love-sick attempts with Juliet Capulet had been noticed by all parties concerned. This time the rumors that spread over Verona about a Capulet and Montague relationship were true, but neither feuding family could do much about it. The Montagues did not dare while Lord Capulet decided to wait and see how the situation evolved. He, like the Prince, knew that his family’s feud was coming to an end. No longer would Verona tolerate the havoc and chaos that their almost weekly brawls created.

No, it was better to confront the situation head on. If that meant forming a union with the young Montague heir, then so be it.

Likewise Tybalt had realized the same thing, albeit in relation to Benvolio. If he was going to eventually bed the younger man, he would have to tolerate Romeo’s continued existence.

The Prince meanwhile was congratulating himself on a plan well carried out. Only to be interrupted unwelcomely by a knock on his drawing room door.

“Come in,” he called, annoyance bleeding through his tone.

The door opened, haltingly slow. Escalus was just about bid the visitor to be quicker when the door opened enough for him to see who was on the other side. The haggard, drawn face of Mercutio, his kinsman, stood on the other side.

“My Prince,” Mercutio said with a raspy voice, as though unused to talking, for indeed he had been such up in his room upwards of three weeks. “May I speak with you?”

“Yes, cousin Mercutio,” Prince Escalus answered severely. “I believe you had better.”
Thank you so much to all who have left kudos, comments, and bookmarked. I'm so glad people are enjoying this story so far. It really has been a labor of love for me so it is nice that other people like it and like my characterizations and writing style as well.

“And then Lady Capulet proclaimed I was the most polite Montague she ever met,” Romeo finished his story, his delighted smile and expressive hand gestures a sign of his good humor.

Benvolio cast a gaze round the spotless library, thankful that no one else was there this bright late afternoon. Romeo’s boisterous attitude would have surely offended any would-be library users who sought the normal quiet sanctity between tall bookshelves.

Romeo had found Benvolio earlier that afternoon, quietly reading a rather intriguing treatise on Florentine botany. Romeo had waylaid his cousin, set on regaling the younger man on tales of his success the night prior.

“It seems you had quite a triumph with Juliet and her kin, my dear cousin.”

“Aye, that I did. Their embrace was chilled at first, but over the course of the evening I was able to prove my worth.”

“Congratulations. Hopefully this will prove in your favor.”

“And how was your evening, ‘darling’ Benvolio?” Romeo waggled his eyebrows ludicrously at Benvolio. It had the effect of making Romeo appear rather like a beached, drunk fish caught by an equally drunk fisher, something which was not at all attractive. Benvolio valiantly attempted to contain his mirth but it explored outward once Romeo added to the spectacle by floundering his hips and shoulders wildly, contradictory to any sort of motion of rhythm or accepted forms of proprietary.

Any time Benvolio’s laughter stalled, Romeo began new ludicrous and raunchy gestures to incite further reaction.

Finally Benvolio could take it no longer, “Peace! Romeo, mercy! I beg of you, mercy!” He stammered between laughter. His side hurt from laughing too much and he barely had enough air to string his plea together.

Romeo took pity on him and desisted with the gestures. Benvolio had to take deep gasping breaths to restore his lost oxygen.

“Oh, I have not laughed that hard since Aurelio fell afoul of Liana’s peacock.” Benvolio exclaimed once he was recovered. “What canst I do with thee?”

“Why, see that I am successfully married off so that you no longer have to concern thyself with mine pitiful soul,” Romeo responded with a blaize wave of his hand.

“And subject poor, defenseless Juliet to thine charms? What kind of cousin-in-law would I be?”
“Cousin, mine own charms are what lured her to me in the first place.”

“Oh contraire, Romeo, now thou art playing thine own self for a fool.”

“A liar I know you not to be, but a fool is looking more and more probable this day.”

“Now see here, my good cousin-”

A knock on the door disrupted their joyfully absurd argument. Benvolio looked up in confusion.

“Come in,” Benvolio called at the library door.

To his surprise, Prince Escalus opened the door. Benvolio, and Romeo behind him, quickly got to their feet. “My Prince,” Benvolio greeted. “Is there something you require from us?”

It was unusual for the Prince to seek out any one. Normally he had them summoned.

“Nothing for mine own sake,” Prince Escalus admitted. “But for the sake of my family, I have someone who wishes to speak with you. Someone who owes Benvolio quite a debt.”

Prince Escalus moved aside slightly to reveal the hunched figure of Mercutio.

Next to him, Benvolio heard Romeo’s quick indrawn breath. Benvolio admitted this was a surprise. He had seen neither hide nor hair of his friend since that disastrous day at the market. Although Benvolio knew Mercutio had rooms at the Palace, being the Prince’s kin, he also knew it was more apt that his friend would retreat to his private rooms rented in the northern section of town, near Ponte Pietra.

“Greetings, Mercutio,” Benvolio said into the heavy, weighted silence.

“Mercutio,” Romeo joined in reluctantly.

“Benvolio. Romeo,” Mercutio said haltingly. This quiet, subdued countenance on Mercutio was hard to digest in comparison to his normal lively and animated attitude.

Silence.

It was hard, to have a conversation with two others that did not wish to be here. Prince Escalus was no help. He had fled as soon as a dialogue had been established, no doubt aware of the unfortunately awkward conversation that was to occur. Benvolio was half tempted to call ‘Coward!’ after the fleeing prince, if not for the fact that the former Montague understood the Prince’s reasons. This was a conversation to be had between the three of them.

Still, it was difficult. Mercutio was over-weighted by guilt. His presence was dripping with it; it poured like rain from an already full reservoir.

Romeo on the other hand was vibrating with pent up anger and unrest. He clearly was itching to start a fight.

Neither were truly willing to begin this conversation, so Benvolio was stuck in the middle of a this perpetually tense situation.

“Havoc!” Benvolio cried suddenly to the room.

No war started, as it might have if he had been on a battlefield full of soldiers. The war cry did not begin a fight, but it did do as Benvolio intended. It snapped the other two out of their daze.
“Benvolio?” Mercutio questioned.

“I refuse to sit in solemn silence whilst the two of you wallow. I am the injured party here. Let us hear your declarations of guilt, Mercutio, so that I may judge them and deliver your sentence.”

“Judge, jury, and executioner, eh?” Mercutio said with some of his old fervor.

“As is my right, do you not decree?” Benvolio challenged.

“Aye, true enough.”

Mercutio took a moment to settle himself.

“I already forgive you, if it helps,” Benvolio said quietly in the silence.

“It does not,” Mercutio grimaced. “It only reminds me how unworthy I am of your friendship.”

Benvolio made a noncommittal noise.

“But I suppose that is the price I pay,” Mercutio continued. “I am unworthy of you, Benvolio. These past weeks have made me realize how much you went unappreciated next to me. You are kind and compassionate and wise. You alone saw the folly in the feud, which I myself succumbed to like a beggar whose loyalty could be bought be a piece of bread. After I became friends with Romeo, my first friend, I adopted his family’s cause as my own, without thinking of the greater consequences.

“I made you pay those consequences,” Mercutio continued. “And for that, I am truly sorry. My foolish and mean words hurt you greatly. I doubt I will ever be able to fully reclaim our former friendship - right now I still find myself unworthy. I cannot, in good conscious, resume our friendship until I have proven to you and to myself that I am worthy of such an auspicious honor.”

Mercutio bowed low once to Benvolio. Benvolio responded with a regal nod of his head. “I understand. Thank you for your apology.”

The Prince’s cousin turned to Romeo, whose almost unrestrained anger quieted to a gentle simmer. “Romeo.” He greeted then paused, unsure where to go next.

“Mercutio,” Romeo returned. However he still hadn’t forgive Mercutio to the same extent, for he stirred the pot. “Have you heard of Benvolio’s suit with Lord Tybalt?”

“Aye, that I have. Congratulations and many well returns to you, Benvolio.”

“Thank you, Mercutio.”

“If you will excuse me, I must return to my rooms,” Mercutio tried to flee the room.

Benvolio called out his last parting shot. “Mercutio, please do not become estranged from us, not like this.”

Mercutio froze in the doorway. “I will try.”

Then he turned and escaped down the corridor.

“That was much kinder than he deserved,” Romeo accused.

“I meant what I said. I still consider Mercutio a friend. It will take much effort on all our parts to recover from this, but I for one would like to make the effort.” Benvolio stared at Romeo with guilt-
trip in his eyes.

Romeo sighed. “Do not look at me like that. I still have not built up an immunity to those eyes.” Romeo pondered then reluctantly acquiesced. “Very well, I will also try.”

“That is all I can ask, dear cousin.” Benvolio said.

Juliet’s eyes hungrily roved the letter in front of her, mouthing the words as she read them, hearing Romeo’s voice reading to her in his tender but passionate voice, the one he spoke to her with when it was just the two of them alone, full of wonder and love.

“My good cousin, I believe you are blushing,” a smooth voice erupted from behind Juliet. The young girl jumped, stuffed the letter into its envelope and swiftly hid it behind her as she whirled to face the speaker who had surprised her.

“Oh, ‘tis you, Tybalt,” Juliet breathed out. Her cousin had entered her room without knocking, snuck past the sitting room and found her sitting on her plush, four poster bed.

“Were you expecting someone else? Your Lady Mother, perchance?” Tybalt teased her, his right eyebrow quirked at an off angle.

Juliet mumbled something under her breath.

“What was that? I’m afraid I did not hear you,” the older man said pleasantly. He clearly knew that he was not meant to understand her offenses but chose to make her life worse. Such was her cousin. As much as she cared for him, he had made it one of his life goals to act as the elder brother she did not have. Those duties were carried out with a fervent and often unholy glee, much to Juliet’s consternation.

Thus, he knew she often was at odds with her mother, Lady Capulet. The fearsome lady of the House, Tybalt’s own aunt, was a very hard woman to please and stubborn to a fault. She was also very cunning and sly when she wanted to be.

Juliet loved her mother but was equally wary and in awe of her as well.

“Does it show?” Juliet asked with a laugh.

“Only to me, dear cousin. And perhaps your lady nurse.”

“Small comfort that does me,” the girl mocked with a pout.

“Now tell me, what does this letter say, whose contents you are so eager to hid from mine own aunt?” Tybalt asked.

“Nothing,” Juliet quickly responded. But as soon as she spoke she knew she had answered to quickly. Her cousin’s mouth formed a half smile, his eyes calling her on her lie. They both knew she was lying.

She surrendered, albeit with the dramatic flair of every little girl when faced with an overprotective older brother.

“Fine.” Juliet sighed dramatically and then flopped back down on her bed, bouncing a little. Tybalt chuckled, joining her and taking a seat next to her on her bed.

Juliet paused before speaking. She was not sure how to begin.
Tybalt did not speak either. He appeared to be waiting for her to start the conversation. For all his bravado and energy, he could be a good listener. She knew she had a biased view of her cousin; he was always nicer to her than he was to nearly anyone else. The only person she had seen him be this nice to was Benvolio.

“The letter is from Romeo,” Juliet finally said.

“Romeo of the Montagues?” Tybalt’s tone was neither accusatory nor surprised. It held a forced calm.

“Romeo, cousin to Benvolio,” Juliet quietly but fiercely defended. “And that is all that matters.”

“Indeed?”

“Quite so. If you are going to court and possibly bed Benvolio, you must respect his family. Currently the only family he has is Romeo.” Juliet enjoyed being able to argue this point. She had spent much of her life as the treasured daughter of Lord Capulet - seen but rarely heard. It was freeing to finally have a sense of personal agency.

“A valid point,” Tybalt responded. “One that was made perfectly clear last night. I assume you gave him permission to write to you then?”

“Aye, I did.” They had been writing in secret for nearly four weeks, but the party had given them an excuse to make their correspondence public. As extra precaution, they kept their notes casual and light, in case they were to fall into prying hands.

“And what does he say?” Tybalt appeared genuinely curious.

Juliet read him some of Romeo’s letter - a mix of genuine comments about Romeo’s day and some scribbled lines of poetry.

“Love is an ever-fixed mark / That looks on tempests and is never shaken; / It is the star to every wandering bark, / Whose worth's unknown, although his height be taken.’ He appears to be very concerned with love for a girl he has just met,” Tybalt said, unimpressed.

“Benvolio once told me that Romeo is like a supernova. His love is hot; it is fast and fierce and it burns all that it touches. But he also said Romeo just needs the right person to temper his flame,” Juliet said quietly, caught in recollection of a conversation she had had with the younger man at the party during a moment of calm.

“And you would like to be that person?” Tybalt’s tone was again carefully bland.

“I do not think I would mind,” The young Capulet admitted with a soft smile.

The next few days passed with a short of calm. Mercutio hesitantly tried to regain his friends’ trust. Benvolio allowed it, but he doubted whether their friendship would ever truly forget Mercutio’s actions.

Benvolio took the opportunity to go out into the city. Before this, he had subconsciously restricted his travels into Verona, since the last time he had been in the marketplace he had left with serious wounds.

Knowing the only way to break his fear was to face it, Benvolio left the sheltering walls of the Palace early one morning and ventured forth to the eastern market. Many times Romeo, Mercutio
and he had passed away the days and Benvolio had many friends amongst the city, of all classes.

He took the time now, seeking out all those he was friends with. The butcher on one corner and the bookseller down a side alley, the flower girl who had once had engagements with Romeo (by sheer luck Benvolio had accumulated good and personable relations with all of Romeo’s various romantic entanglements over the years). All expressed happiness at seeing him well and on his feet.

Other strangers also took a moment to interact with Benvolio. They too vocalized how pleased they were to see him, how peaceful it had been these last weeks, no brawls to speak of. This was practically unheard of in Verona. Nary a fortnight went by without violence done in the name of the Capulet and Montague feud. It was approaching three weeks now and no further blood had been spilt.

For this reason, Benvolio was almost grateful he had been injured. Although unpleasant, it created a situation wherein both parties were forced to find peace or else lose. Thankfully such a situation was not at the cost of someone’s life, like Benvolio had feared it might be if Romeo and Juliet’s romances had progressed any further in the same way they had been going.

The former Montague swiftly skirted the square where he had been injured. The hurt was nearly made anew, what with Mercutio’s fumbling but heartfelt apologies the night before. Better to leave that wound to heal some more before trying to prod it all the same.

“Benvolio!”

Benvolio turned, startled to see his cousin and Tybalt gaining fast on his halted position. The two former enemies drew quite a few eyes as they walked purposefully toward their missing third.

“Romeo. And Tybalt. How pleasant it is to see you. Good cheer to you both. What has it that brings you to me? And together at that.”

Romeo and Tybalt both had unhappy frowns on their face - but not, it appeared, for being forced into each other’s company. Romeo spoke first. “We came to seek you out this morrow cousin, only to be told that you had left for the streets of Verona.”

“Yes, imagine my surprise, when I discover my intended is out cavorting about the streets of Verona, after being injured. I was quite displeased,” Tybalt broke in.

“You are still healing,” Romeo took over. “Just because you attended the Prince’s party does not mean your health is not still in jeopardy.”

“Although I appreciate the fact that you have a strong constitution, it is still unwise for you to leave the palace, given that you have not been cleared by Prince Escalus’ physician.” Tybalt fixed Benvolio with a penetrating stare.

“Moving too fast may cause you to re-injure yourself.” Romeo fixed his cousin with a somber gaze of his own.

Benvolio viewed the byplay with mounting humor until he could stand it no longer. At a pause between in conversation, Benvolio began to chuckle lightly. “Peace, please.”

The two men exchanged a confused glance over Benvolio’s head as he dissolved into more mirth, which only made the younger man laugh more.

“The two of your rival the fiercest mother bear protecting her cubs,” Benvolio told the two of them. “As though birthed from the same womb, so similar are you.”
“Perish the thought, dear cousin,” Romeo remarked with

“For all our benefits, I will nobly ignore your slight.” Tybalt sniffed with feigned disdain.

“I apologize for having offended you so, noble Tybalt, cousin Romeo,” Benvolio laughed again. “And I am honored that both of you have taken great pains to find me on this wonderful morning. Surely you have better things to with your time?”

“Nothing could be more important than my future beloved.” His sickly-sweet words were at odds with his bland expression.

“I thought I was already your beloved,” Benvolio matched his bland expression with upraised eyebrows.

“You are, but now I have made you admit it,” Tybalt smirked at his victory, miniscule though it was. Perhaps it was not.

Point to you, Benvolio thought.

“You doth deserve each other,” Romeo commented with a slow-forming smirk.

“Aye?” Tybalt asked.

“Benvolio has been lacking a sparring partner for some time,” Romeo revealed. “I’m afraid he outmaneuvered me far too long ago. Mercutio puts up a good fight, but enjoys wooing women and antagonizing you Capulets far too much to be bothered with extended, intelligent games of wit.”

“Then it seems we equally suited. I would be honored to provide fodder any time you so desire,” Tybalt turned his cat-like smirk on Benvolio.

“Thank you Tybalt,” Benvolio delivered with a long-suffering, wry tone. “Your noble sacrifice is noted and appreciated.” Romeo chuckled in amusement.

Benvolio continued. “I gather from your spirited contributions that you were not able to find me in the Palace and were directed down to the city? What were your desires on the onset?”

“It was my desire to assess the overall health of betrothed,” Tybalt says right away. “As it is my duty as a responsible finance.”

“I merely wanted to see you this day, cousin.” Romeo was just as he had always been, not as witty but just as heartfelt.

“Thank you Romeo and Tybalt. I am honored by your dedication,” Benvolio said with solemn intensity. He decided to tease the two men. It was obvious that they were genuinely concerned when they had discovered his departure to the city market. “However, now that you are, you may aid me in carrying my purchases.”

“Should we not return to the Palace?”

“Nay. The physician has cleared me, I have danced the night away. Surely I am well enough for a day in the market?”

Benvolio’s resolved face must have convinced both of his overbearing mother hens that their arguments would fall on deaf ears.

“I would be honored to accompany my intended wherever he so desires,” Tybalt said slyly.
Romeo turned on Tybalt, obviously betrayed by the man’s casual acceptance after so long spent worrying after Benvolio. “How can you allow? He is obviously not well enough -”

Tybalt carried on, talking over Romeo’s objections. “I only ask, as a small token to those who care so deeply for you, that you, Benvolio, next time, you inform one of us before you leave so that way we may accompany you. As a boon to Romeo and I both, since we worry about your health.”

This would allow Tybalt greater access to Benvolio’s schedule, but since he visited practically every other day, the concession was not a large one.

“Very well,” Benvolio acquiesced with grace. “Shall we, gentlemen?” He nodded to both and then resumed his leisurely stroll through the market.

Romeo and Tybalt proved to be admirable companions, if prone to small skirmishes of words. Benvolio took full advantage of having the two additions. He stopped at all the book vendors he could find, locating and purchasing several volumes of interest. Naturally Tybalt and Romeo volunteered to carry his purchases.

They acquired food stuffs whenever they smelled a street vendor with appetizing food. Benvolio preemptively halted the argument to come by declaring that Romeo and Tybalt could take turns paying for the food.

As they feasted on some fresh bread from Mistress Lofts’ bakery, Benvolio happened upon an idea that only now occurred to him. Once it happened, he was unsure why he had never marked it before. He turned his attention to Tybalt.

“Good Tybalt, I have a compromise I wish to propose for your earlier demand.”

“ar demand was accepted; any compromise now on my end follows an unwise business model of allowing one’s opponents to renege on a contract. It would be a stain on my honor.”

“A savvy businessman would allow his opponent to lay out their terms first, to see what value there may be.” Benvolio pointed out with a sly smile and good humored laughter in his eyes.

Tybalt affected a highly polished, elitist air. “But a noble man must balance between the honor to be lost and the value to be gained,” he sniffed in mock disdain.

“So you do not wish to hear my compromise?”

“I did not establish that. Speak your offer.”

Benvolio carefully masked the grin that attempted to make itself known across his visage. “I propose an addition to the people whom I will apprise when I decide to leave the Palace. I have already assented to Romeo and yourself. I would also like to inform Juliet, your own cousin, of the next time I venture out, in the hopes that she may join our excursions.”

Tybalt quirked an eyebrow. “It is a curious demand. What is the wisdom in this design?”

“Where is the wisdom in not attempting overtures to Juliet? If our business agreement continues forward, I may very well end up living with your family. I refuse to be hemmed in by a lack of friendly and intelligent conversation. Lord Capulet and his inner circle seem to tolerate my presence with grace enough, but it is unlikely their our paths will cross in familiar setting for some time. Juliet will be the closest to my age in the main family. It would behoove me to extent an overture of friendship as soon as possible.”
“Your logic is sound,” Tybalt acknowledged. “Although you may be surprised how often the elder Capulets interact once you have caught their interest. And believe me, you have certainly become their next project.”

“I am honored,” Benvolio said dryly.

“You should be. Mine uncle is exacting in every way possible. That you have drawn their attention, especially so positive, bodes well for your future, even if our suite does not reach its intended climax.”

“I will try to be worthy of it.” The former Montague had to admit, it was disconcerting to have all this attention on him now. First from the Prince and now Lord Montague. In the past he was used to being overlooked behind Romeo, the Clan heir, and Mercutio, in all his base and raucous vivacity. That people besides Romeo and Mercutio found worth in him, Benvolio, created a hitherto unknown warmth in the pit of his stomach.

“You will bring Juliet the next time we meet then?” Benvolio reminded.

“Aye, I give you my word,” Tybalt promised.

“Very good. She seems intelligent and well spoken. I will enjoy having another individual to converse with.”

“Juliet is quite the lady. I am honored to claim her as kin,” Tybalt agreed with pride.

“From what I have seen her, she will grow into a formidable heir,” Benvolio remembered Juliet’s fierce defense of Romeo. Even at 13, she had a commanding presence.

“Aye, Juliet is magnificent,” Romeo said with a curious tone of voice. Tybalt turned to the Montague sharply and Benvolio could not prevent a wince. Although he had gained Juliet’s presence in future outings, the reminder of Romeo’s ill-disguised interest was sure to rouse Tybalt’s ire.

“Given these facts about her virtue,” Tybalt said in a severe tone of voice. “It is with utmost certainty, Romeo of the Montagues, that I warn you away from my cousin. I know you danced with her and that she enjoys your affections through letters, but she is merely 13. Not yet ready to be married.”

If Romeo had been of bird kin, surely his feather would have ruffled outrageously. “Thine uncle disagrees with you, dear Tybalt,” Romeo taunted. “He was all too pleased to marry Juliet off to Lord Paris but a fortnight ago.”

Tybalt scowled but continued. “Aye, but Lord Paris is allied with the Capulets and has a substantial estate. Plenty of capital and potential to take care of Juliet and her eventual progeny.”

“I am the heir to the Montagues. My fortunes are equal to any of Lord Paris’.” Romeo huffed.

“You are for now. I think your father has shown what he thinks of those that ally themselves with the Capulets. How do you know your father will not reject you and throw you out as well? Then what fortune will you have with which to woo my cousin.”

“Juliet does not value me for the size of my wealth or resources. She values me for my worth as Romeo, her h-” A swift elbow to Romeo’s stomach from Benvolio was not enough to prevent the beginning of the thought, but he stopped any other syllable from escaping his thoughtless cousin’s mouth.
Tybalt raised an eyebrow. “Subtle that was not. Now my curiosity has been piqued. What were you going to say, dear Romeo, that has Benvolio so up in arms?”

Romeo flushed a deep scarlet for he had realized the wisdom in Benvolio’s actions. Now he had to quickly cover up his near faux-pas that would have resulted in the truth of Romeo and Juliet’s marriage.

“Nothing of consequence,” Romeo tried to deny. “I was saying that Juliet values me as her one true honest suiter, someone who is not interested in as Lord Capulet’s daughter. She and I see each other without veils, surnames, and coins.”

“If this is true, what do you see in Juliet?” Tybalt demanded. “Why her?”

“I beg your pardon? Juliet is more than worthy of anyone’s attention!” Romeo objected.

“She is. But why did you pick her, out of the dozens of women your fleeting interest has focused on in these last years. What happened to Rosaline, the last apple of your eye?”

Tybalt had obviously heard tale of Romeo’s hummingbird-like habits of fluttering from flower to flower.

Romeo grimaced. He halted abruptly in the middle of the street, diverting the busy market pedestrians as they swerved to avoid the sudden roadblock. Romeo noticed this looked around. He spotted a nearby alley and pulled Tybalt with him, into the shelter and uninterrupted quiet.

Benvolio followed along at a more sedate. This was a discussion that Romeo and Tybalt needed to have between the two of them, if Tybalt would ever agree to honor Romeo and Juliet’s union.

“Tybalt. I know you and I have never had a peaceable relationship. But I will be honest with you. That night, at the Capulet party, I was not expecting to looking for anything. Mercutio convinced us to attend the party as a way to forget Rosaline. I intended to disobey those orders and continue to pine for Rosaline. Roseline is lovely. She has the most wonderful laugh and her eyes crinkle when she smiles. She waves her hands whenever she talks, like a maestro conducting an orchestra. She is a dreadful dancer at everything except exceptionally fast tangos. She-

“If this is your attempt at convincing me you are worthy of Juliet, it is not the best strategy to talk about other women.” Tybalt interrupted flatly.

“But you see, I notice things about people. I see beauty in everyone I have been in love with. Every girl - there was a reason I tried to woo them. In Juliet I see innocence balanced with a fierce independence. Juliet is still a girl, but she knows how the world works. When she finally is let out into the world, beyond Lord Capulet’s protecting walls, she will thrive. Her independence and good nature will see her through all that God would test her with.

“She is beautiful too,” Romeo continued. “She is one of the best dancers i have ever danced with; it seems like she floats more than dances. Her smiles are shy, but when they occur, it is like the sun shining through clouds after a particularly cloudy day.” He continued to wax poetry about Juliet: her grace, her intelligence, her potential, and even her faults.

Benvolio, after relaxing when it appeared Romeo had learned his lesson and was not going to accidentally mention the secret marriage, was amused to watch Romeo get more and more doe-eyed and sappy. In addition, Benvolio could see Tybalt’s tension slowly melt as Romeo kept going on and on about Juliet.

Eventually even Tybalt had to stop Romeo’s complete mess of sap. “Enough, Romeo,” Tybalt’s
expression had transformed into a bemused disgust. “It is clear you know my cousin very well.”

“She is my match,” Romeo proclaimed with utmost certainty.

“So it would seem,” Tybalt murmured.

Benvolio spoke quietly to Romeo. “It is a wise man that can forgive old enemies.”

Romeo huffed. “Truly, cousin, between you and my dear Juliet, Tybalt and I will embark on a new journey of friendship and camaraderie.

“Thank you, Romeo, for belaying my fears.” Tybalt spoke almost gently. “I love my cousin and it is comforting to know you love her with the passion she is due.”
“May I speak with you, Romeo?”

The question caught Romeo unawares. He was back in the Montague Compound a few days after the Prince’s party. Although he slept there, he had began to notice a change in his feelings towards this place. He spent more time at the Benedictine Monastery, in Friar Lawrence’s cell or at the Palace than he had at the Montague Compound.

Everyone steered clear of him these days, for all their benefits. He was no longer as furious as he had once been at his house and his father. He understood the chaos of that day, the confusion, and heightened emotions that had caused everyone to take reckless action. Hell, he had even gotten married that day after knowing a girl for only two days. If anyone could be labeled as reckless, he certainly should not be throwing stones at others when his own house was constructed of glass.

But he refused to acknowledge any of them until they apologized to Benvolio. Benvolio had done no wrong.

This waiting game worked to his advantage. The more the other Montagues avoided him and his judgemental eyes, the more they remained unaware of the Prince’s machinations.

Thus his father’s sudden appearance at his side was surprising. He took a moment to study his father. His father seemed to have aged years since he last saw him. The head of the Montague House had dark circles under his eyes and his hair had an unkempt look, as though his father had brushed through it many times in frustration, a habit his father had in times of extreme stress.

“Aye, Father,” Romeo answered with puzzled politeness.

His father motioned for Romeo to follow and together they made their way to his father’s private study. The dark-paneled room on the third floor faced towards the west and every evening the sun would bathe the room in rich ambers light as it set. Romeo had fond memories of playing in the room as a child, curious to know what his father was doing. On one memorable occasion he had escaped the clutches of his nursemaid, snuck into his father’s study, and hidden away there all day, burrowed underneath a couch. His nursemaid had been frantic with worry but his father only laughed gently when he discovered his young son sleeping peacefully in that forgotten nook.

“Take a seat,” his father motioned to the very couch he had hid under as a child once they entered the study and secured the door. “And this time on top on the couch, rather than underneath it.”

Romeo chuckled in acknowledgement. “I understand.”

Romeo waited for his father to make this first move.

Which came rather quickly. “I understand you are still in contact with Benvolio?”

“Aye, my Lord.” Romeo was cautiously optimistic. His father’s tone had been neutral, but Romeo had learned enough over the years to know that he was not noticeably angry. Not yet at least.

“Good.” A pause. “How fares he?”
“Beg pardon?”

“Benvolio? How fares his wounds? How fares his emotions?”

“His hurts have been healed, my Lord, for some time. Friar Laurence treated him initially but the Prince’s physician continued it and ensured that Benvolio remained in excellent health. As for his mental well-being, he seems in good spirits, for all that his situation merits. May I ask why you inquire, my Lord Montague?”

Romeo took great pleasure in using his father’s title as a reminder that as Lord Montague, the elder had absolutely no business in Benvolio’s affairs.

The elder did wince at the intended slight. He gathered himself admirably though and continued on, “Romeo, I most of all regret the outcome of this situation. I -”

“The situation, as you so call it, where you banished Benvolio on the word of vindictive and malicious gossip? That situation?” Romeo exploded. His anger, which had been festering for some time, found a target, justified or not, and exploded. “I hardly think demeaning it to a ‘situation’ does justice for all the hurt Benvolio has suffered.”

“Aye, that is true. And I am sorry. Truly I am.” Lord Montague did look repented, but Romeo’s anger, once uncorked, was hard to stem. Like an erupting volcano, it was impossible to reel in once its flow had started.

“It is easy saying that now, my Lord, but not so when you consider the consequences of your actions that you can never take back. Benvolio is ostracized forever from his family, his home.”

“But he was never happy here!” Lord Montague’s anger, as fearsome as his son’s, was more contained. But it too hard a breaking point.

“I did watch, Romeo. I knew Benvolio never truly lived within our means. He may have been born into this family, but it was not where he was happy. I am ashamed that my quick and thoughtless action caused him more pain, but all I truly wanted was for him to be happy. If Tybalt, an enemy this is true, but honorable and just, could have made him happy, who am I to stand in the way of Benvolio’s happiness?” Lord Montague’s voice dwindled in anger as his monologue came to close.

“You…” Romeo did not know how to respond to this confession. He had no idea his father kept this closely informed on the situation. Worse, Romeo himself could follow the twisted logic. Benvolio had always stood out amongst the Montagues, his pacifist and bookish tendencies made him unique.

“I am not completely uninformed, my son,” Lord Montague said with a faint trace of humor coloring his tone.

“I just did not know you cared this much about Benvolio,” Romeo admitted.

“Benvolio is the only thing I have left of my brother. I love him as I loved his father, but in a different way. He has been your brother since his parents passed over ten years ago. How can I not have loved him just as much as I love you?” Lord Montague, Romeo’s father, turned his face to the side, as though shielding from the harsh memories. Romeo had scant memories of his uncle’s death, just that it was sudden and tragic. He later learned Lelio Montague, Benvolio’s father, had been killed by an accident with one of his horses. Benvolio’s mother had died in childbirth, so at age five-and-a-half, Benvolio of the Montagues had gone to live with his uncle, Romeo’s father.

Romeo was pulled from his recollections when Lord Montague resumed speaking. “Benvolio is very
“Easy to love,” the elder man confessed.

“I know,” Romeo agreed.

The pair sat in solemn silence, each lost in thought.

“Do you believe he will forgive you?” Lord Montague asked his son quietly.

Romeo, who was now bereft of all his stored anger, pondering the questions for a time, though he already knew the answer.

“I know he will.”

Tybalt once again was visiting Benvolio at the Palace. Over a week had passed since the Prince’s party. As usual, one of the Prince’s staff escorted him to Benvolio’s room, knocked and then left him to wait for a response.

Tybalt, as he had after the first time, deigned waiting for a response and opened the door with easy affability.

The sight that greeted him was an unwelcome one.

“You,” he stated flatly, gazing in the startled eyes of Mercutio.

Mercutio was sitting on one of the chairs in the sitting room, while Benvolio seemed to be pacing near the window on the westward wall.

Benvolio looked up, equally startled, though he recovered much quicker.

“Must you continually barge in?” he complained, but went over to Tybalt nonetheless.

Tybalt swept him into an embrace and continued to glare at Mercutio. “What is he doing here?”

“He can hear you,” Mercutio responded angrily. Interestingly the other man did not make any more response. Usually even Tybalt’s mere presence would have the other hopping mad.

“Mercutio and I were having a discussion,” Benvolio stated firmly. “Which is something that is none of your business.”

“It is my business if it turns out anything like your last discussion, considering that one ended with you getting banish’d from the Montagues,” Tybalt viciously pointed out, more a stab at Mercutio than Benvolio.

The jab had the desired effect. A pall developed around Mercutio, thick and full of misery.

“Enough,” Benvolio ordered quietly. “As I already told Mercutio, you two, if you desire to be a part of my life from now on, will have to learn to at least tolerate each other’s presence. I will not have any more childish taunts designed to inflict as much damage as possible. I do not expect peace, but keep it civil.”

Tybalt fixed the interloper with a steely gaze.

Mercutio tried to return with his usual verve but it fell flat by a kilometer.

They would have sat in stony silence, staring at each other, had Benvolio not intervened. “Now,
Tybalt, what is your news?"

“I did not come to bring news as such; rather, I bring an invitation to you to visit the Capulet compound. Seeing as since your last visit was hampered by interfering knaves, I believe now would be the perfect opportunity for you to visit your future abode.” Tybalt’s comments about ‘interfering knaves’ was a poorly disguised jab at Mercutio, but Benvolio allowed it, though he did shoot a disappointed look at Tybalt.

“Your offer is much too kind,” Benvolio said with all courtesy and kindness. He looked very tired and worn, and Tybalt had no doubt it was from dealing with that scoundrel, Mercutio. If that villain was not kinsman to the Prince, he would have been intimately acquainted with the tip of Tybalt’s sword long before now. “But my time now is for Mercutio. I would be forever grateful if we could reschedule the trip to tomorrow afternoon. Then I may also receive the Prince’s permission, since I am his ward.”

Point to Benvolio, Tybalt thought. The subtle reminder that any and all dealings with removing Benvolio from the Palace would have to go through Prince Escalus first was an intelligent insight that would force Tybalt to curb his normally assertive and dominant tendencies.

“It is as you say,” Tybalt conceded with grace. “I will leave you to your talk.” Tybalt leaned forward, plucked Benvolio’s hand and left a resounding kiss on the back of his hand. Then, for good measure, he turned it round and pressed a tender kiss to the palm as well.

Benvolio merely sent him an amused glance, but Mercutio looked very much like he was holding back a volcano as Tybalt sauntered out of the room.

Although the day was not looking as bright as it had before Tybalt had engaged with Mercutio, it still had promise. He sought out Prince Escalus first, bowing to Benvolio’s wisdom that the Prince should be the one to authorize the trip.

One of the household staff pointed him towards the first floor study. The Prince occupied the massive desk in the center of the room, directly underneath a colorful fresco of Jupiter and his siblings.

Tybalt knocked carefully and entered when commanded.

“Young Tybalt,” the Prince said with a raised eyebrow. There was a question underlaid there but as the prince observed Tybalt, he must have found the answer in Tybalt’s expression. “I see my cousin has finally began to make amends to your intended.”

“Aye, my Lord,” Tybalt bowed briefly. He could not suppress the look of disgust Prince Escalus noticed. “I will not ask that you make pleasantries with mine kin, for I know it would be tantamount to asking birds to cease flying or fish to drown. It is in your nature. However, I do ask that you tolerate him when necessary and leave violence behind.”

Tybalt’s face must have still showed his continued disapproval for the Prince continued, “If not for my sake, than because it would please Benvolio?”

Tybalt could just imagine the disappointed frown Benvolio would give him. Deciding to ignore the unfamiliar pang of emotion conjured by the fictitious situation (something suspiciously like regret and guilt, his traitorous brain told him), the Capulet bowed his head in reluctant acceptance. “I pledge to resist the temptation to provoke a fight. If Mercutio comes after me, I will defend myself.”

“That is all that I ask,” Prince Escalus acknowledged the difficult compromise with a respectful nod
of his head.

Silence.

“I assume something brought you to my side this day, beyond an annoyance of my kin?” the Prince asked, one eyebrow cocked in a mischievous gesture.

“Aye, yes indeed. I would much appreciate your permission to attend Benvolio tomorrow. I have a long day planned, one where I will remove him from your protection.”

“I need not remind you the penalties I will lay upon you should my ward come to any harm in your charge?”

“Nay, it would be a disservice to our relationship.”

“Very well. Unfortunately, Benvolio is not available tomorrow. I have arranged an appointment for him with Master Lorenzo, my trusted tailor. The dear boy is in dire need of more clothing.”

“And the next day?”

“I have plans. How about this at the week’s end?”

It was Tuesday now, which would mean putting off the day four days. Still, Tybalt knew when to recognize a power play when he saw one. Benvolio and Prince Escalus were both more than willing to remind him that this suit would only happen with their permission.

“Very well, my Prince. I will send notice to Benvolio that the date has been decided upon.”

“Excellent. I am positive Benvolio will be thrilled. He has been lacking in entertainment”

“I am pleased Benvolio will be pleased. If I may take my leave?”

“Yes, you are dismissed. Fare thee well, young Capulet.”

“Thank you, your highness.”

Now that Benvolio had asserted his ability to walk, and dance, the younger man took great joy in being able to walk to the library by himself. After a long day spent at the mercy of a master tailor, he basked in the relaxed, comfortable atmosphere of the quiet library. He found much joy in the act of perusing the shelves of the massive collection, being able to run his fingers along the spine or pull out a book at random and read a passage of his choice. That is the way he has found some of his most beloved tomes, picking at random like a bear might pluck a plump fish from a river.

The library was a two story affair with towering shelves lining the walls of the room and an open floor. A second story balcony ran along the edges as well, wide enough for plenty of traffic and safe enough for the six rolling ladders on sets of rails that allowed interested bibliophiles access to the high eight foot tall shelves on both levels. The library faced the river and held a pleasing view of its high banks. A fireplace sizzled and popped along the wall perpendicular to the window.

Benvolio ensconced himself in a small alcove near the fireplace, absorbing the pleasant heat and light from the setting sun. He had a lengthy volume of French poetry in his lap, a sweet concoction of warmed chocolate freely given from Teodosio’s realm on the table next to him and he intended to savor both during the waning evening hours by the light of Diana’s beauty and Hestia’s blessing.

Not even a full hour after seeking refuge in the library, the fates took it upon themselves to lambast
those plans without so much as a by-you-leave. They shredded them to smithereens and for good measure set them adrift in the River Styx.

Their messenger came in the form of one of the palace servants with a note addressed to Benvolio.

_Benvolio,

Lord Montague has arrived quite suddenly this evening and requests the honor of your presence._

_The decision is yours. I am entertaining him in the main drawing room for the moment. Please send word if you would prefer me to send him away._

_Sincerely,

Prince Escalus_

Benvolio did not allow the chill he felt creeping down his spine as he addressed the servant. “Please tell Prince Escalus that I will join him and Lord Montague in a few minutes.”

“Very good, sir,” the servant murmured. He left as quickly and as silently as he had entered, a wrath bearing ill omens to those that encountered him.

Ruefully, Benvolio acknowledge to himself the cruelty in that thought. It was surely not the man’s fault he had been the bearer of bad news. Fate played him as it much as it played Benvolio.

He turned from those fluttering thoughts to the matter at hand. His uncle - former uncle (but truly he could not deny years of memories, mostly pleasant, of having Lord Montague for an uncle and eventual pseudo-father-figure) - had come for a visit. Benvolio knew it would happen eventually, given Romeo’s ongoing narrative from the Montague perspective.

He was not afraid his uncle. Lord Montague had always been kind to him, especially to his shy, awkward, five-and-a-half year old self when they had both lost an important person, father and brother respectively. From Benvolio’s experience, Lord Montague was actually more personable than Lord Capulet. Where Lord Capulet was a cool temperament and fearsome shadow of promised retribution and vengeance, Lord Montague was more like his son, quick to laugh and jest, but equally quick to anger. The only time the two were similar is when they had to deal with each other. Then ire would out and chaos would reign. It was as though the Lords were a representation of their families.

Moments of happiness played behind Benvolio’s eyelids, small flashes of everyday life where normalcy had not been broken and Lord Montague’s fond voice encouraged, laughed, empathized, and loved with Benvolio.

In the darkest corners of his mind, Benvolio knew where his real fear stemmed from.

It stemmed from the facing the reality of his situation.

Up until this point, he had had no contact with any of the Montagues, save Romeo. Although logic and brain acknowledged he had been banish’d, his heart had yet to catch up with that reality. What if it had all been a misunderstanding? Surely he could not have been left adrift with only the clothes on his back, his wits, and a stab wound to the side? Once Lord Montague saw him, he would put everything to rights.

His heart ached for those thoughts.

At least once a day he expected his uncle or aunt or extra cousin to entered unannounced and drag him off to another family function he had almost missed while his head was buried in a book.
But no one was coming.

His uncle and aunt and cousins and branch family would never gently tease him again.

His uncle was not even his uncle any more.

No more friendly conversations with the porter, Giotto, who secretly wrote overstated, grandiose romances under a female pen name. Benvolio was the only other person who knew, outside of Giotto’s wife. Sometimes Benvolio would agree to edit the next stories, although his face would blush cherry red the whole time he read the licentious and salacious sexual scenes.

No more childish chases through the halls, angering the head steward. Mercutio had made it his personal mission to force the man to acquire a sense of humor out of self-defense. It had not worked up until this point and now Benvolio would never know if it would succeed.

No more late night talks of philosophy with Lord Montague. It was the only time when Benvolio and the lord would have alone together. Occasionally, on especially sleepless nights, when Hypnos was nowhere to be found, Benvolio and Lord Montague would each drift to the library, attempting to solve the crisis by luring the reluctant God back with offerings of dust covered, musty, glorious volumes, bursting to the brim with the wisdom of the centuries.

Everything hurt. It was not a sharp hurt, with a bright wound, bared to the world. This wound was hidden so deep in his very soul that no one else knew it existed. Unlike most wounds of the flesh, this wound might never heal. It would always be festering, just beneath the surface.

Benvolio could not stop the sob that escaped him. Nor could he prevent the one after or the one after that. The dam broke, a flood that he had been holding at bay through sheer determination and force of will. It had been cobbled together those first hours after he awoke, patched up and strengthened over days with Romeo’s support and even Tybalt’s unfeigned interest. But now, the pitiful floodgate had finally given way to the full might of Benvolio’s tumultuous emotions. Tears emerged, first as a stream, then a torrent, until he curled in on himself as his world came crashing down around his ears.

Lord Montague was more than pleased that he had not been turned away at the entrance gate. He would not have been surprised if his name had been added to a list of undesirables, suitable to grace the Prince’s presence only when summoned by necessity. Under normal circumstances, as the lord of one of Verona’s most influential families, he had enjoyed almost unlimited access to the Prince’s compound. Now, with the Montague’s star waning, he was unsure where his power ended and the Prince’s generosity began.

He was shown to the Prince’s luxurious drawing room. The servant knocked swiftly on the door. “Come in,” the Prince’s voice called from inside. The servant opened the door, bowed Lord Montague in, and firmly shut the door after him.

“Ah, Lord Montague, welcome,” Prince Escalus greeted, looking up from his desk full of paperwork. It was looked like the paperwork was waging a war with the desk, a slow hostile takeover scheme that seemed to be working to great effect.

Prince Escalus’ lack of surprise did not flummox Lord Montague. The lord assumed word had been passed that he had arrived.

“Thank you for seeing me at such an unfashionable hour,” Lord Montague said politely. Calling hours were usually in the afternoon. It was irregular for spontaneous company to visit after super, and as a lord, Montague often had his days planned out far in advance to accommodate his busy
schedule. Prince Escalus was the same.

“Not at all, Lord Montague. I did so want to finish our original conversation.” Prince Escalus’ not-so-innocent smile set the tone for how the evening was going to progress.

“Yes, of course,” Lord Montague conceded. “However, I have a request of my own.”

“You wish to see Benvolio.” Prince Escalus was very blunt and extremely unimpressed by his expression of disdain.

“Aye, my Prince,” Lord Montague did not feel that circling the question was the most conducive to achieving his goals.

“I will make you a compromise,” Prince Escalus parried. “Why do we not return to our first conversation? If I am satisfied with your answers, then - and only then - will I ask after Benvolio. However, I will not force him to see you if he does not wish it. You must respect his choice.”

“I agree,” Lord Montague said instantly. This was a better deal than he expected. He had almost been certain the Prince would never allow him to see Benvolio, everything else in the world be damned.

Prince Escalus moved aside his papers and gestured for Montague to take the seat across from the besieged desk. He fixed the lord with a penetrating stare. “Excellent. Now, what is the verdict you have attained?”

Lord Montague braced himself for the conversation to follow.

“It is as you said on that first day, my Prince.” Montague conceded in defeat. “Benvolio was completely innocent. No evidence exists that supports that a relationship - let alone a courtship - existed between Benvolio and Tybalt before the night of the Capulet’s Masquerade.”

“So you exiled him for nothing?” That was a stake, bypassing his ribcage and driving right into Montague’s heart.

“Aye, my Prince. I have come to apologize.”

“On on hands and knees, I hope?” Prince Escalus’ tone was rock solid, without a hint of bend.

“Should it be required. Benvolio is a gentle soul-”

“Just because his nature is kind does not mean you should take advantage and renege on what you owe to that boy.”

“I do not deny that I, and the rest of the Montagues, owe Benvolio a debt so large it cannot be quantified. If I believed for a second it would please Benvolio I would petition to end his banishment.”

“You are the Lord of the Montagues. Is the power not within your control?” The Prince said mockingly, as though he did not already know the answer.

“Nay, it is not so. Once the official documents have been processed by Verona, only a royal order could override it.” Considering Prince Escalus was one of said royals he knew very well the process for going about it. “I presume that you would refuse such a request if I were to ask?”

“You are correct, my dear Lord Montague. Benvolio does not belong to you any longer. I will never
send him back to such place.”

The casual disdain Prince Escalus showed in voice incensed Lord Montague. “It is not as if Benvolio was abused! He was never harmed, nor taunted, nor hit. He was loved, he was cared for. After my dear Lelio died, Benvolio was the only thing I had left of my brother. I love him! And I will continue to love him, even if he does marry that thrice-damned Capulet.”

A secret smile tugged at the Prince’s lips before it was quickly dismissed to make way for a neutral expression.

“I am pleased to hear that.” Prince Escalus nodded to Lord Montague in respect. “Please do not think I am accusing you of anything. Benvolio has made it clear that he had a very happy childhood. I was merely concerned that outliers might seek to harm him.”

“I doubt that would happen. Everyone is so frightened of their own shadow they would hardly bother with Benvolio,” Lord Montague admitted. “Indeed, it might have the opposite on morale. After your rather loud declaration of the status quo, most of the family was quite distraught. If anything, I fear young Mercutio may be the one who has to watch his back.” At the mention of the Prince’s declaration, Montague fixed the royal with an unimpressed stare.

“Thank you for the warning. I will take that into consideration,” Prince Escalus assured him.

Silence.

Content that he had made his case, Lord Montague sat back, no longer poised on the edge of knife’s blade, but with a calm confidence. He bore the heavy, measured stare with patience, waiting for his words to be judged by the Prince of Verona.

Finally the Prince relaxed to match Montague’s casual confidence. “I am satisfied. Thank you for answering my questions.”

“I would be lying if I called it a pleasure,” Montague admitted. “But I thank you for hearing my reasons before passing judgement. It is my only hope that Benvolio will be as kind and generous. I have much to make amends for with him.”

“I will leave the decision in his capable hands,” Escalus said. Then he jotted a quick note on a spare piece of parchment with a long, elegant, eagle feather quill. As it dried, he rung a bell on his desk. A servant answer the call swiftly.

“Yes, my Prince?”

“Yes, my Prince.” The Prince inquired

“The servant smiled slightly. “Yes, my Prince. Master Benvolio is in the library.”” Humor dripped from his tone, making it clear how often the question had been asked with the exact same results.

“Good. Will you please take this to him?” Escalus folded the now-dry note and handed it to the young servant.

“Yes, my Prince,” the man bowed and departed, closing the door behind him.

“I have made it clear to Benvolio that it is only by his will that he need see you,” the Prince warned Lord Montague. “If he does not desire it, I will bid you leave and nothing more shall be said.”

“I understand, my Prince. Thank you again for the opportunity.”
“I know how much this situation has cost him. Anything that may set his soul at rest would be welcome.”

With that they continued on to more mundane topics. Lord Montague politely inquired after Lady Adrianna's health. The Prince admitted that his lady wife was completely ecstatic to have Benvolio in their home, since that meant her favorite companion bibliophile was that much easier to reach.

The Prince slyly returned the favor by asking about Lady Montague and Romeo.

Lord Montague smiled wryly. “My wife is well, though marginally distressed by recent events. She was privy to my reasons and at the time agreed with them. Now that the business has grown beyond its means, she is as concerned as the rest of us. If you permit it, I will send along a care package she has made for Benvolio. I believe it contains some of his favored pastries that our cooks make.”

Then he fixed the Prince with an unimpressed stare. “Romeo, on the other hand, is rarely at home. I dare say you know this, considering I suspect most of his time is spent here, in the company of Benvolio.”

“Aye, that is true enough. He is here near daily, always looking after Benvolio. I think the poor lad has gotten quite tired of the mother hen impression. Between him and Tybalt, Benvolio hardly gets a moment in edgewise,” the Prince was good enough to admit.

“Young Tybalt is here?” Lord Montague inquired, careful to modulate his tone into one of off-hand curiosity, rather than an accusing snarl.

“Every other day or such,” the Prince freely stated. His face gave nothing away, but Montague could feel the judging stare.

Lord Montague paused minutely, retrieved a deep breath and let it out, using it to wash away his initial, gut-driven responses of anger and rage.

“Does he treat Benvolio well?” A desperate longing to know anything and everything about the other Capulet formed in Montague’s throat. Before then, he had no desire whatsoever to know about the young nephew of Lord Capulet. The man was a Capulet - that was all he needed to know to fuel a voracious, passionate hatred. Now though - now times had changed.

The Prince looked at Lord Montague for a long, almost endless, moment. The lord met that stare fully, their eyes locking. The Prince broke first, turning to the window in contemplation. He opened his mouth to speak, but before he could utter a sound, a knocking came from outside the door.

“Come in,” Prince Escalus called.

The same young servant as before, Cassius, opened the door and entered. “My Prince, Master Benvolio said he will join you and Lord Montague in a few moments.”

“Thank you, Cassius,” the Prince responded. The servant bowed and departed.

Lord Montague resumed staring at the royal, waiting for an answer. Prince Escalus sighed once, heavily before turning back to the lord.

“Tybalt’s and Benvolio’s relationship is a complicated one. Theirs is not an innocent love, of puppies and small children and stolen pecks. Theirs is not even a love yet, though I might hedge that it may turn into one very soon. Tybalt is all wit and fire with sparks of dangerous flame to injure the unsuspecting. Benvolio has already been injured, but still stands up and challenges Tybalt at every turn. Tybalt has never had to face that. I think it is both frightening and appealing to the young
“He is not the match I would have picked for Benvolio,” Lord Montague freely admits. “I would have picked someone softer, with just as much intelligence but none of the bite.”

“Perhaps Benvolio might have been happy with that choice,” the Prince conceded. “And the union is not set in stone. But I believe this is the best match. Tybalt will continually push Benvolio out of his shell. In return, Benvolio will force Tybalt to be kinder, to think of others before he thinks of himself.”

Lord Montague considered those words. “I worried for a time,” he admitted, “that Benvolio would recede, like a clam, and never be able to live a life outside his protective armor of Romeo and Mercutio. These last few weeks have forced me to realize that Benvolio is far stronger than I gave him credit for all those years.”

“I think that every father worries for his child, and only wants the best for them,” Prince Escalus said softly.

“If you take away everything else, what remains? I am a father, and an uncle, first, and a lord second.” Montague presses the palms of his hands to his burning eyes. “I forgot that, but Benvolio has made me remember.”

Prince Escalus was noble enough not to respond, not to make baseless platitudes. He let Montague feel the arduous burden of expectations and responsibilities. Montague respected that but did not think now was the best time to be examining his emotions with the care and wisdom they needed. He busied himself by trying to erase the hallmarks of his distress. In a few minutes he was the composed and resolute lord one would expect from the honorable Montague House.

“I thank you, my Prince, for your stalwart advice. You have always been a friend, no matter how much you despise our senseless feud.”

“It is my responsibility as Prince of this city to care for its welfare. Even if its citizens occasionally gainsay said stalwart advice.” Prince Escalus quirked an eyebrow and Montague acknowledged the jab with a chagrined smile and a nod of his head.

A companionable silence followed.

Prince Escalus finally glanced at the large, ornate clock on his mantle piece. “Benvolio should have been here by now,” he wondered aloud. “Nearabouts ten minutes have passed.”

“Perchance he changed his mind and no longer desires to meet with me,” Lord Montague theorized with more than a touch of self-loathing.

“Nay, if this be so, he would deny the meeting in the first place. Something else must have held his attention hostage,” the Prince said with some concern.

“The library is not so far away from here?” Lord Montague questioned. The last time he had been there was during a party some years ago. During the middle of it, Lady Adrianna had absconded with a diminutive Benvolio, barely on the cusp of twelve summers, but with a mind and a thirst for literature fathoms beyond his age range. After frantic searches for the boy when the party ended, the Prince had hazarded an accurate guess and found the missing fugitives hunched over a rare volume in the massive library.

“Aye it is.”
“May we not journey there? Perhaps Lady Adrianna has again captured his attention.”

The humorous grin and pleased chuckle that escaped Prince Escalus at the reminder made it clear he too remembered the event.

“Aye, she probably has.”

They rose together and departed the drawing room. The royal led the way down the corridor, to the right and down another corridor to a large, inlaid, oak set of double doors.

Prince Escalus opened the door, and they both entered. However, their good humor disappeared at the sound of muffled sobs coming from near the fireplace.

The room had grown dark since Benvolio had sat in the fading light cast by Apollo’s departing chariot. Now Artemis had taken her brother’s place, her lonely moonlight a pale shadow in comparison and hidden behind boisterous clouds. The only light in the room came from the fireplace, it’s light barely enough to illuminate the hunched figure sitting in a large, leather backed chair in an alcove to the right of the fireplace.

Lord Montague recognized those sobs. They had once been commonplace to a five-and-a-half year old who had just lost the only parent he had ever know.

“Oh, Benvolio,” he moaned softly. Without caring about the royal in his presence, Lord Montague swiftly covered the distance to his young nephew. “What hast I done to thee?” He murmured in self-recrimination. He kneeled in front of the large chair and reached a hand out to lightly stroke Benvolio’s golden locks.

Benvolio startled, whether from touch or recognizing Montague’s voice it was unclear. The young man looked up.

“Uncle,” he cried. Then he shook himself. “Nay, Lord Montague, I do beseech your forgiveness.”

“Hush, dear boy, hush,” Montague said. “I will be uncle as long as you need it. I am so sorry, Benvolio. Truly, my sorrows are unending, for the pain I have caused you. I did not… I mean… It was all so foolish… and Mercutio and the council…. I should never have listened to them. You have no idea how much regret I have, from the second I passed judgement until now. If I could take it all back…”

“But you cannot, uncle,” Benvolio cried. “I am banish’d. Everything I have ever know is gone forever.” He wiped his eyes with a spare handkerchief.

“Not gone, never,” Lord Montague swore, ignoring the empty feeling in the pit of his stomach.

“Yes, it is!” Benvolio cried, wrenching his head from side to side, trying to shake off his former uncle’s touch. “Do not lie to me! I am no longer welcome in the House of the Montagues. So you have decreed and so it shall pass.”

“It is but words, my dear nephew-”

Benvolio looked up, staring at Lord Montague with startlingly clear eyes. “Words have meaning. Words have power. Words can change people’s lives in the blink of an eye. Once you change something, it can never return to what it was.”

Lord Montague sighed heavily and admitted defeat. “You speak true. Through my thoughtless and ill-advised action, I have committed you to a life devoid of everything that was once dear to you. I
owe you a debt beyond my ability to correct.”

Benvolio spoke, fixating in the distance as though seeing what was not there. “It will be the people I will miss most, and the memories I made. Although my memories are my own, place and face give enormous pleasure when matched correctly. The Montague Compound was home and with it came years of relationships and adventures, the likes of which are impossible to replicate without dedication and care.”

He came out of the trance and returned his gaze to Lord Montague. “Those are the intangible things you have taken from me. They can never be replaced.”

Lord Montague bowed his head in shame.

A thick heavy silence permeated the room. Prince Escalus remained on the outskirts of the scene, watching as an observer.

Benvolio carefully studied his uncle’s hunched form. Throughout his whole life, Lord Montague always seemed an impenetrable fortress. A pleasant countenance, a passionate temper, and height well beyond Benvolio’s smaller frame always made the younger man look up to his uncle, in both a literal and metaphoric sense.

Now Lord Montague kneeled before him, not as a powerful lord, but as a penitent uncle.

“Let your actions will be your oath,” Benvolio commanded softly. “Aid me in establishing a new life, separate but connected to the one that I lived in your House.”

“Aye, it shall be done,” Lord Montague promised unhesitatingly.

“There will be conditions, uncle,” Benvolio cautioned. “This is not a step to be taken lightly, especially considering your hatred of Capulets. I am afraid I am up to my eyeballs in them.”

“This feud almost cost me your life,” Benvolio’s uncle growled. “It will not cost me your love.”

Benvolio blinked owlishly at his uncle. He smiled, ever so slightly. “Thank you, uncle mine.”

“What for, dear Benvolio?”

“For surprising me. In a good way.”

“Tis nothing. Now, what are your conditions?”

Chapter End Notes

Escalus kind of is a jerk-face. Technically, he could cancel the banishment, but that may throw off Tybalt's courtship. The Prince needs that connection, to soften the eventual blow of Romeo and Juliet's marriage.

Politics. What more can you say?
“Romeo is most taken with you, my dear cousin.”

Juliet jumped at the unexpected voice. She whirled quickly, her skirts spinning, to face who was speaking.

“Good Tybalt, you startled me so,” she complained.

“You jump like a startled rabbit, my good cousin. Out here among the trees and vines I almost expected you to skitter away into your warren,” Tybalt jested.

He had found her in the courtyard garden outside her window. It was the very same one Romeo had climbed into and made his first overtures on her affections. Juliet now thought it her favorite part of the compound.

“I would not jump so if someone weren’t quiet like a fox,” Juliet responded in kind. “What else are we rabbits to do when surprised.”

“So you are the rabbit and I am the fox, eh?” Tybalt said slyly. “Well then come here and prepare to be devoured!” He cried lunging after her. Juliet yelped and tried to dance out of his grasping arms. He caught her by one fleeing hand and pulled her to him, mercilessly attacking the spots most ticklish on her body.

“No!” She flailed while laughing. “Tybalt! Stop that!” She was giggling helplessly, her sides aching in laughter.

“Never!” Tybalt continued with a grin. He was well used to playing these games with his cousin and knew right where to hit.

She flailed and wiggled even harder, trying to escape. Her giggles hampered any reasonable chance she might have had. However, unforeseen by both participants, Tybalt’s assault on her ticklish spots made her right hand spasm as she brought it around. It miraculously aimed true. It plonked Tybalt right on the noise, hard enough to daze. The shock made him let go of Juliet and without anything to support her she fell to the soft grass unharmed.

Tybalt stepped back, his eyes watering.

Juliet cried out in distress, “Oh, good Tybalt, you are not harmed, are you? I am so very sorry. I am not sure what happened.”

Tybalt blinked a few times, scrunching up his face. Once he concluded nothing was seriously wrong he looked down at Juliet. “Well, I guess that shows me that poor, defenseless rabbits are not so defenseless any more.”

Juliet, once she realized no harm was done, said righteously, “Justice has been done.”

“Hah! Thou art a swift avenger,” Tybalt conceded.

“How fares thy nose?” Juliet asked with more concern, reaching up hesitantly.

Tybalt let her fingers connect to the hurt flesh. “Barely a flesh wound my dear.”

“Good,” she said, retracted her fingers as swiftly as the concern vanished from her voice, to be
replaced by sly humor. “Serves you right.”

“Aye, that it does.”

They sat on the grass together. Juliet reexamined her position, moving from kneeling to sitting on her rump with her legs crossed in front of her. Tybalt mirrored the position.

“You are well, my cousin?” Tybalt questioned.

“I am joyous!” Juliet sang with shy glee. “Tis a wonderful day, Helios is strong and healthy, Demeter is in my garden, and the future looks just as bright.”

What’s more was that Romeo and her were well one their way to loving matrimony. Juliet’s hasty union with the older boy was turning out to be one of the greatest joys of her young life. There was something utterly addicting about holding such a delicious secret. Juliet had been beholden to her parents her entire life, specifically her mother, who had a tyrannical streak neatly hidden beneath her elegant facade. Never before had she possessed some scrap of knowledge, some piece of intelligence this powerful. This control, this power, it was nearabouts intoxicating.

“That is well,” Tybalt said, interrupting her train of thought. “I am glad. Your lord father and I were concerned with so many visits to Friar Lawrence.”

“The good Father has been kind to me,” Juliet admitted freely. “He offered me wise counsel and allayed my doubts and fears.” And provided an unassuming meeting place for her and Romeo’s secret rendez-vous.

“About your suit with Lord Paris?”

“Yes, that and much more,” Juliet admitted. “I confess I went through many periods of doubt when my good mother and father arranged my marriage. It seems that every day I would oscillate between loving them and hating them.” She said that last bit quietly, sharing a secret she had only confided to Romeo.

“Why?” Tybalt inquired, his stern, but humored countenance melting into a more subdued one.

“I love them because they are my parents and I know they only mean what is best for me. But I hate them because they tried to control my life. They tried to force me into an unwanted marriage with a man who is nearly twice my age. I have only the utmost respect for Lord Paris, but it was not my choice!” Juliet ended on a near shout, her simmering disgruntlement and resentment finally boiling over.

Her breath was coming in pants by the end, like a horse worked beyond its endurance. Tybalt took her hand with all the gentleness and tenderness he could muster.

“Thank you for sharing this with me,” he quietly murmured. “It cannot have been easy.”

A cross between a huff and a snort escaped the girl but she felt much lighter at the confession. Although she had told Romeo of these feelings, he did not really understand. He had never been subjected to her mother’s megalomaniacal tendencies or her father’s quiet cunning.

“It is done now,” Juliet said, her anger leaving her as quickly as it had appeared. “And what’s more, now I have Romeo!”

Although she knew she should not bring up the young Montague around Tybalt, for that would have previously invited disgust and disgruntlement, but she could not help herself. Romeo represented so
much of what was good in her life right now. It was not wrong of her to want someone to discuss it with. Besides, Tybalt had been unusually generous towards Romeo in their past conversation.

“He still writes you letters with subpar poetry?”

“They are not subpar!” Juliet argued. “I think it is terribly romantic.”

“I suppose that since you are the intended recipient, as long as you are satisfied it is acceptable.”

Juliet nodded her head in faux solemnity. “Thank you for your generosity.”

“But he is still a Montague!” Tybalt

“He is my match. I will accept no one else,” Juliet decreed.

“It is not your choice!”

“I have already made my choice. And nothing you and my father proclaim will deny it otherwise. Only the Lord of Heaven can separate us now,” spoken with unforgiving steel, Juliet stared at Tybalt for a lengthy minute.

Tybalt saw something in her eyes or maybe her fierce, indomitable stance, back straight. If she had been of the canine persuasion, the hair along her spine would have been stiff and raised.

“What have you done, cousin?” Tybalt asked, voice soft with cautiously controlled rage.

“I have done as my heart desires, for the first time in my life,” she said with pride.

Everything sung around her. The adrenaline coursing through her veins made the world sharp and bright. Terror and fear warred with a sort of feverish, passionate recklessness.

She sat there, her energy compounding until it reached its peak, cresting over into an uncontrolled sob of emotions. She shoulders trembled under the weight of endless shakes. She did not know whether to laugh or cry. She was poised on a precarious edge, any sudden move would send her slipping into an endless abyss.

“Juliet,” Tybalt called out, gentle yet urgent. He touched her shoulder, bringing her slowly away from the edge. The terror and uncontrolled emotions subsided and her breathing evened out.

“Thank you, dear Tybalt,” Juliet said as she calmed down. A few more deep, refreshing breaths and her heart calmed. “I am much restored now.”

“So I see.”

Silence.

Juliet refused to break it. If her cousin wanted to know the truth, she refused to air it in a frenzied panic. She would discuss it calmly and rationally. She was an adult, or at least, since being married, she had willingly, if unknowingly, taken on the responsibilities of being one. The weight of that knowledge came and went, but this time it stayed with her, settling deep in her core.

“I dare not ask. If I do, it will only confirm long harbored suspicions. But I must know,” Tybalt stared deep into her soul. “Are you and Romeo involved?”

“Aye, we are.”
Juliet remained sitting, but Tybalt sprang up, like a leaping tiger. He was well deserved of his nickname now, Juliet thought, hissing and spitting like an angered feline.

“Whence came this?”

“It is as love always is. Abounding in nature, filling men’s hearts. I know not where it came from, only that it has been buried so deep in my flesh it shall never be removed; a thousand barbed arrows could hold no less a sway,” Juliet spoke passionately.

“You are fortune’s fools, the pair of you. And Benvolio as well, I suppose.”

“Nay, Benvolio was as naive as thee, my dear Tybalt. He learned of this well after, on the day of your bout with noble Mercutio.”

“That was more than a fortnight ago!” Tybalt cried. His shout ruffled the calm serenity of the garden. Juliet hurried scanned the courtyard, ascertaining no one had chased after Tybalt’s shouts. She firmly grabbed her cousin’s left hand, pulling him down next to her on the soft grass.

“Peace, cousin. Please!”

Tybalt still appeared angry, but the volcanic rage had mellowed into a stream of lava, rather than an eruption.

“Very well. Explain, please.”

Juliet, quiet, confident, and poised, laid out the chronicle of her and Romeo’s affair, starting that night at the Masquerade to the hasty Monday marriage to the accidental reveal after the market brawl. She spoke of the Prince’s plans - to end the feud in a bloodless fashion, by using Benvolio and Tybalt’s union as a smokescreen to distract from Romeo and Juliet’s marriage.

“The Prince thought it best if my Lord Father and Lord Montague believed they acted under the freedom of their own choice - am I correct?” Tybalt questioned. “When really there was no freedom to be had.”

“The Prince is master of all,” Juliet said, shrugging her shoulders in helpless amusement.

Truthfully, it suited Juliet very well. Prince Escalus was a force of nature, one who usually ruled Verona benevolently, but with a hands-off approach. There was a status quo in effect, one for years and years. The tipping point had arrived, finally pushing the normally solemn and lenient noble to enforce his will.

Juliet was more than thankful to be on his side, rather than her family’s.

Prince Escalus’ wrath was swift. It was fierce. And it would not stop until the feud was little more than a memory or a note in a history book.

“Benvolio discovered this when the Prince did? That Monday evening?” Tybalt’s tone had shifted, from accusatory to curious.

“Aye, he did.”

“And how did he react?”

“Oh Tybalt,” Juliet exclaimed. “Benvolio is lovely. He was so surprised, but he was so kind and gentle.”
“He was very surprised?”

“Not completely,” Juliet admitted. She thought back to those hurried moments inside the Benedictine Abbey. “Neither Romeo nor I were particularly discreet. I think he suspected something, that night of the party.”

“As well he should. Benvolio is not stupid. He is very observant.” Tybalt seemed to take pride in his intended.

“Aye. You are a lucky individual, my cousin. Benvolio is more than worthy.” Juliet said definitively. “You will treat him kindly?” She continued.

As she had confessed to Romeo and Benvolio, Juliet knew her cousin well. Tybalt could be argumentative and mean; Benvolio, although strong, was still very vulnerable.

“My dear cousin, I will cherish Benvolio with everything that I am.” Solemnly, Tybalt took Juliet’s hands in his. He looked into her eyes, veracity and honesty shining through.

“He is precious to Romeo,” the younger girl confessed. “He is precious to me.”

“He is dear to me as well.” Tybalt confessed. “Benvolio is - indescribable. He is the sun that rises every morning and the moon that shines every night. If Zeus had been here now, Ganymede would nay have been cupbearer.”

“He is pleasing and wise. You could not ask for a better match,” Juliet agreed.

“Indeed. Sometimes I wonder what the Gods must be think now, having such a mess as ours. No doubt Aphrodite takes considerable care in arranging our love lives with the most trouble she can find.”

“Yours and mine as well, dear Tybalt,” Juliet smiled demurely, though wisdom shined in her eyes. “I dare not think of what might have happened, had the Prince not offered his aid.”

“Such troubling matters are best left to the past,” the older man counseled. “Speculation and conjecture will only harm your soul in the long run.”
Tybalt’s grand plan for his night with Benvolio began with dinner at the Capulet Compound. The week’s end found Tybalt escorting his intended down the narrow streets in the Capulet side of town, ending at the entrance of the Capulet Compound.

Seeing the Capulet Compound in the stark light of a new day must have been a unique feeling for the former Montague. To Tybalt’s knowledge, Benvolio had only seen this strange land from the other side of high walls, until the night of the party. Even then, illumination came from thousands of candles and lanterns, flickering endlessly, casting roving shadows on ancient walls.

The Compound was the seat of the House Capulet, where the main family, and most of the closest relations lived. Tybalt, being related to Lady Capulet, rather than Lord Capulet, should, by all rights, have had property elsewhere. However, Tybalt’s mother had been Lady Capulet’s favourite sister. Tybalt’s father was a merchant of some fortune, who specialized in exotic silks. When Tybalt was sixteen, his parents had left on a trip to find more contacts and develop the business further.

Tybalt, instead of going with them, had chosen to pledge himself to his uncle, Lord Capulet. The offer was accepted, and as Lady Capulet’s favourite, he was given quarters in the Compound.

His parents had never finished their trip, even to this day. They much preferred traveling to stagnant management. He exchanged letters with them, as often as he could. But he was content with his life here. Since he had no sons of his own, his uncle had very graciously taken Tybalt under his wing, which Tybalt was more than happy to repay with staunch loyalty to the Capulets.

Although it had been many years since seeing the Compound from the perspective of an outsider, Tybalt nonetheless was careful to read Benvolio’s expressions and let the younger man have ample time to absorb the visual scenery.

The main entrance to the Compound opened up into a beautiful and lush courtyard. In front of the two men, directly across from the gate lay the public parts of the house. The ballroom, where the masquerade had taken place was housed there, as was the library, the Lord’s Chamber, a receiving room where Lord Capulet allowed free entry to any that needed his assistance or advice. It also contained a large drawing room, a study, the kitchens, the scullery, an ornate formal dining room, several smaller dining rooms, and a series of smaller rooms that served whatever function they needed to.

The northern wing held guest rooms, servants quarters, and quarters belonging to minor family members. Most Capulets lived in the surrounding neighborhood, a sprawl of kin and cousins. Tybalt lived in solitary chambers in the northern wing.

The southern wing was for intimate family only. Lord and Lady Capulet had sprawling quarters on the third story. Juliet had smaller but very generous rooms on the second story. Lord Capulet’s powerful mother, the Dowager Lady Capulet, had equally impressive set of chambers on the first floor. The quarters that Tybalt had alluded to earlier, the ones Lady Capulet was preparing in the southern wing, were near Juliet’s on the second floor.

Tybalt suspected this was a show to Benvolio as much as it was a wedding gift. The southern wing was by far the most ornate. People who lived in the southern section were the power in the family.
Although the rest of Verona would not know the significance, the rest of the Capulet family would understand the meaning and treat Benvolio with respect.

Not that Benvolio needed that protection.

But the effort was appreciated.

Tybalt came back to the present as he guided Benvolio around the compound. He had Lord Capulet’s blanket permission to show his young beau the whole of the compound, something unheard of for a Montague. No Montague had been knowingly allowed beyond the public center of the compound in over 200 years.

Benvolio eyed the other Capulets lagging around the courtyard, who stared back at the former Montague.

“Are you positive that the likes of me are allowed into your hallowed walls?”

“Aye, and mine uncle is most welcoming to you,” Tybalt said, catching when Benvolio’s gaze was being diverted to. He stared at his kin over Benvolio’s head, daring them to make a comment.

No one wanted to face down the notorious nephew of Lord Capulet so they respectfully nodded and then averted their eyes.

Benvolio glanced back over his shoulder, just quick enough to catch Tybalt fierce expression.

The younger man quirked a lopsided grin.

“I thank you for defending mine honor, noble Tybalt. My maiden heart is all aflutter with your passionate safeguard of my delicate reputation.” His droll voice but dancing eyes told Tybalt what he thought of that.

“You are mine to protect. It is my duty as your future spouse,” Tybalt assured the younger man with a roguish smile. Although it was said in jest, there was real emotion behind the promise. Tybalt was known throughout Verona for his quick temper and fierce wit. What was often left unsaid was that said temper and wit was most often used in defense and for protection of his kin and clan. Now Benvolio ranked high amongst those honored souls and Tybalt was quick to reassure his intended of the luxuries that afforded him.

Benvolio’s smile turned softer, more genuine, recognizing the offer.

“It is most welcome,” Benvolio assured him. “Now, pray tell, how many souls live at this estate?”

Tybalt accepted the diversion, and allowed himself to be pulled into the role of herald, eager to introduce Benvolio to all those important he comes across. He showed Benvolio through the most ancient section of the compound first, down to the foundations that began hundreds of years ago, which allowed all that have come after.

The kitchens and catacombs were the only remains of that history, but knowing Benvolio like he did, Tybalt was eager to tailor this day to fit the things which would intrigue his future spouse the most.

Flies, honey, and vinegar were words to live by.

From there, they moved up. They spend the most time in the library, where Benvolio gently ran his fingers along the spines of every book he could get his hands on. A lover’s caress, one for the written word and its admirers. Tybalt had never been particularly entranced by the wisdom in these pages
but now he wondered if there might be some way to get Benvolio to touch him the way the younger man touched these books.

He could just imagine those smooth, delicate hands in other places, tentative but determined, as Benvolio would wont to be.

A stirring of his flesh made his breeches uncomfortably tight. Ruefully he supposed now was not the time for licentious thoughts.

“If you continue to fondle our books so, Master Alessio, our Librarian, may cite you for immoral behaviour,” Tybalt jested.

“My behavior is only equivalent to any bibliophile’s when greeting a new fountain of knowledge,” Benvolio argued. “The House of Capulet should be honored that I afford its library such a greeting.”

“One member of the House would be quite amenable to those same caresses, without the fear of reprisal from delicate librarians,” Tybalt ran a suggestive hand lightly over Benvolio’s lower back.

Benvolio flushed a bright red. Tybalt understood his reaction. Their past interactions had usually ignored the mounting physical tension that lay beneath their unique relationship.

Only now Tybalt was upping the stakes.

Benvolio cleared his throat in an obvious attend to ignore the sudden shift in tension. “Let us resume our journey.”

“Wise words from a wise man,” Tybalt teased. “If we dallied any longer, we would never make it through the entire house.”

They continued forth, leaving the sanctity of the library.

“How does this compare to the Montague holdings?” Tybalt probed with curiosity.

Benvolio paused for a moment, a completive look forming. “The Montague estate is much the same. We - they - have a central compound, where Lord and Lady Montague, Romeo, and myself, after mine father died, live. It contains a large library, gardens, and the required entertainment spaces necessary for a lord of a large house. The only difference lies in the compact nature of the rest of the branch family. All other Montagues live very close in to our home. Which makes for little privacy, as you can well imagine.”

“Aye, that I can,” Tybalt laughed.

“And the library does not compare,” Benvolio said with a relaxed grin.

They moved southwards. For privacy’s sake, Tybalt did not take them into anyone’s private chambers but when they came to Juliet’s door, Tybalt knocked confidently.

“Come in,” Juliet’s voice answered.

Tybalt opened the heavy oak door and ushered Benvolio inside.

“Benvolio!” Juliet cried when she spotted her visitors. “How wonderful it is to see you.”

She was seated on a divan at the foot of her bed, her soft features relaxed and open. She beamed at the presence of her new cousin. As soon as she saw her visitors, she rose to greet them.
“Juliet,” Benvolio responded, accepting a warm embrace and a kiss on each cheek. “Such a lovely occasion it is to see you. How fare you so?”

“I am well. What’s more, I am exceedingly pleased that you have graced us with your presence.” Juliet said. She accepted a wordless greeting from Tybalt as he joined them. “It was time enough that Tybalt bring you to our home.”

“Tybalt makes no apologies for his ultimate goal,” Benvolio wryly argued. “I was afraid any sooner action on my part would have signaled an act of submission.”

Tybalt barked a laugh, thinking of the countless hours he had spent wooing the wayward younger man. Never before had he encountered a lover so stubborn and so enchanting.

“My dear heart, you are anything but submissive,” Tybalt assured his intended. He gently grabbed Benvolio’s hand and brought it up to press a fond kiss to the back of his hand.

Benvolio blushed a light crimson, which Tybalt was utterly delighted by. He vowed to draw out those beautiful smiles and pleased blushes as often as possible.

Sometime after this concocted plan had begun, Tybalt was surprised to discover his feelings of attraction towards the former Montague had only increased. Before, it was respect towards an enemy, the way a professional hunter admires a particularly ferocious lion.

Now, there was no denying a deeper connection.

The word ‘love’ normally gave Tybalt hives, from a romantic perspective. He was free to use the word to describe the affection, care, and respect he felt towards his family - Lord and Lady Capulet, Juliet, and others. Never had he felt comfortable enough to apply it to a sexual or romantic partner. There had not been many, though Tybalt was certainly no blushing virgin.

Benvolio was slowly and cautiously approaching that territory, inching into Tybalt’s heart with his quick wit, wry self-deprecation, and unending patience and loyalty.

The rest of the tour of the Capulet Compound passed quietly, despite Tybalt's momentous personal realization. Juliet, bored with educational pursuits, joined them to finish the tour. Lady Capulet herself graced them with her presence to show the couple their future quarters.

The rooms were expansive, a sitting room, drawing room, and a bedroom with an absolutely enormous four poster bed.

“I had our carpenters add additional shelves, since I heard tell of your love of the written word,” Lady Capulet said imperiously, with her casual, cold elegance. Only a small smile gave hint of her enjoyment of Benvolio’s profuse thanks.

“Truly, my lady, this is as grand as any Sultan’s palace,” Benvolio said. Then, with a soft smile he quoted, “The ancient sphere established the centre of the world's empire / Through this place, through which Jupiter exercises its heavenly influence. / When the sun saw its parapets from the sky,/ It bowed its head to the ground, and its eyes to the threshold. / When the virgins of paradise beheld it from their gardens, / They took this palace for gold, and paradise as the mine.”

Lady Capulet smirked at Benvolio and completed the quote, “They considered the earth insignificant because of its firm structure; / The air in this palace was so fine that the air outside was heavy. / The architect used his intellect and soul to design this edifice / Through the firmness of his intellect and the grace of his soul.”
“My Lady,” Benvolio breathed, “I was unaware you appreciated the works of the Eastern poets.”

“I have been known to peruse the literary world on occasion,” Lady Capulet said gracefully, a secret smile playing around the corner of her lips. “The Lady Adrianna and I were childhood friends, after all. I have heard many things from her.”

Benvolio’s surprised expression, mirrored by Tybalt who also understood the relevance of his aunt’s statement, rendered the duo silent. Lady Capulet took advantage of this and swept out before either of them could protest.

“Be sure to send Adrianna my love,” Was her parting shot.

“Dear Juliet,” Benvolio declared, a little breathless. “Your lady mother is Athena and Hera embodied; hawk-eyed, cunning, and ruthless in everything she does.”

“Aye, she is that,” Juliet appeared unconcerned by such a momentous revelation.

“It was ever so difficult to obfuscate with her anywhere near. She is much like Argus in that respect.” Tybalt supplied.

“I shall take that warning much to heart,” Benvolio swore. His attention shifted to examine these new, opulent quarters. “I am honored that such attention was focused on my happiness.”

“Why should it not be?” Tybalt questioned, invading his personal space with intimate intent. “You are more than worthy.”

Unnoticed by either man, Juliet quietly slipped from the room, closing the door behind her, the brushings of the lace trims of her dress making nary a whisper on the cold marble floor.

“Long has it been that I have lived in the shadows of perfection,” Benvolio uttered. “It is exceedingly hard to be perfect when your views of beauty and your family’s conflict so.”

Tybalt looked at him with such tender and open care that Benvolio felt he might melt. Slowly, the older man tilted Benvolio’s chin so that Benvolio would meet his eyes.

“Soon as I behold thee, mazed and wildered grew my sad heart; / How shall I my love disclose to thee who tyrant dread art? / How shall I hold straight upon my road, when yonder Torment / Smitten hath my breast with deadly wounds by his eyelash dart? / Face, a rose, and mouth, a rosebud; form, a slender sapling -- / How shall I not be the slave of a Prince such thou art?” Tybalt quoted, his voice mellifluous and soft.

“Surely I do not deserve these words of ardent worship?” Benvolio chuckled weakly, dislodging Tybalt’s hand. “They are high praise for a man such as I. If I recall, Sultan Osman was speaking of a woman as well.”

“If Sultan Osman had beheld you, he would have swept you away into his golden harem. And then where would that leave me?” Tybalt teased lightly. “Without a husband that is for certain.”

“I will endeavor to not travel where I might be abducted into harem then,” Benvolio reasoned.

“If such a fate should befall you, it would be my duty to launch a rescue,” Tybalt stated with utmost sincerity. “You would be the next Helen, the face that thousands of men into battle.”

Instead of taking the complement, Benvolio became serious. “Please do not even speak of such an event. I refuse to be the heart of such a conflict, to be the reason why so many men would lose their
lives. My life and my happiness is not worth that much.”

Tybalt would not be discouraged. “Value yourself more, my Benvolio. When will you see that you are more than worth everything I may bestow upon you? I would bring to you treasures from the far flung places of the earth. Rich spices, saffron and myrrh, from the Orient. Ancient jewelry and valuable scrolls from the tombs of Egypt. Inscriptions and pottery from the bygone Romans. Gold, silver, gems, everything your heart would desire, I would bring to you.

“But I know you, my dear Benvolio,” Tybalt continued in a softer voice. “These treasures would please you, but they are not what your heart desires. Above everything else, you wish to be cherished, to be loved.

“Ist’ strange if beauties’ hearts turn blood through envy of thy cheek most fair? / For that which stone to ruby turns is but the radiant sunlight glare / Or strange is’t if thine eyelash conquer all the stony-hearted ones? / For meet an ebony shaft like that a barb of adamant should bear,” Tybalt finished. “I will protect you. I will cherish you. I will love you until the end of time. All I ask to be allowed to share in your life.”

“My lord Tybalt,” Benvolio breathed, his skin flushed in pleasure, eyes sparkling. “Never has Eastern poetry been so alluring.”

“It pales in comparison to your beauty,” Tybalt said with robust confidence. He slowly raised a hand to Benvolio’s chin, tilting the younger man’s face up. With telegraphed movement he leaned in and initiated a chaste kiss. Benvolio surged forward, transforming the kiss into a thing of wild passion.

Tybalt grinned, nibbling on Benvolio’s bottom lip. Benvolio gasped, and Tybalt took the opportunity to slip his tongue into Benvolio’s mouth. He took his time, and coaxed Benvolio to return the favor. Benvolio, less sure but just as eager, became the invader. In between gasps for breath, the kisses slowed from a fiery inferno to the slow bubble of rolling lava. No less hot, but calmer.

Finally they broke apart. Benvolio rested his head on Tybalt’s chest. The silence was a relaxed one, both were more comfortable in each other’s prescience.

“I am glad it is you,” Benvolio finally admitted.

“I am honored.”

Dinner was a success. They ate amongst the family in the main dining room. Benvolio was placed in a position of honor, on Lord Capulet’s left side. Next to him sat Tybalt. Lady Capulet and Juliet sat across with the rest of the Capulets spread further down the table.

The atmosphere was calmer than at a Montague family dinner. The Montagues were not barbarians, but with Lord Montague and Romeo at its heart, the family had adapted to suit their vibrant and friendly personalities. At the Capulet table, muted conversation never emerged beyond a polite level. Tybalt kept a steady stream of conversation going. Benvolio found himself involved in a stimulating discussion with Lord Capulet about the compound’s architecture as a marker of the different styles that have prevailed since its inception.

After dinner, the real seduction began. Tybalt had arranged a carriage to take them to their final destination. Benvolio was curious but agreed to halt his insatiable questions for the sake of a grant surprise. Individual horses would have made the hour long trip faster, but Tybalt had not wanted to risk Benvolio’s still tender wound.

It also meant he did not miss the moment when Benvolio realized where their final destination was.
He watched Benvolio’s jaw drop as their long meanderings up the mountains to the north of Verona lead them to a lone building, almost glittering in the candlelight. The sun had set by this time. It sat in a clearing near the peak of one of the shorter mountains.

“The Royal Observatory,” Benvolio breathed, his face alight with curiosity and joy. “Never before have I ventured this far. Lady Adrianna had expressed an interest in the past to taking me here, but the day had not yet arrived.”

“I am thankful she did not,” Tybalt admitted with a smile. “I am pleased to be the first person to take you here. The Prince has arranged our visit. Come.”

Tybalt exited the carriage and held the door for Benvolio. Benvolio allowed himself to be escorted into the building, far to entranced by its grand entryway, marked by tens of homages to the Greek Constellations.

Even more references to myth were found inside the building. The entrance door opened up into an elliptical hall. Two staircases on either side led upstairs, presumably to other rooms. The ceiling was painted in scenes of the constellations, from Aries the Ram to Taurus the Bull.

“Greetings, young masters,” a older voice called to them from across the hall. “You would be the guests that Prince Escalus told me to expect?”

The owner of this voice was a gentleman of some year, his hair a snowy white. His wrinkles showed him as someone who smiled often. He was slightly hunched with a set of spectacles perched delicately on the tip of his nose. How they balanced there Tybalt was unsure. It seemed as though the slightest movement would send then tumbling from their lofty perch and crashing to the ground.

“Yes indeed we are,” Tybalt responded. He bowed politely. “I am Tybalt, of the House Montague. This is the Prince’s ward, Benvolio.”

“Good, good,” the older man returned the greeting. “I am Cassius, head of the Royal Observatory.”

“It is an honor to meet you, Master Cassius,” Benvolio said breathlessly, his face a tad flushed. “I read your treatise in the Prince’s Library on your theories about Saturn’s rings.”

“Hm, you did?” Cassius spent a bit more time examining Benvolio and then Tybalt. “Ah, so you’re the two that have been causing such a ruckus in our little town. Adrianna mentioned last I saw her that she would be able to enjoy the company of her sparring partner now more than ever.”

“Your logic is flawless,” Tybalt said.

“Yes it is. Now, Benvolio, have you read Megale Syntaxis and Planetary Hypotheses by Ptolemy? Yes, of course, it is a standard. I find understanding the foundation of the science is most important for serious astronomers. So many young people these days neglect those basics. Abd al-Rahman al-Sufi built upon those with his Book of Fixed Stars. I possess several copies of that in the library here. However, Nicolaus’ theories were in need of augmentation.”

Cassius took off up the left hand stairs, bidding the two follow him into the heart of the building.

Cassius, Tybalt reflected, was not a tour guide. He took them from one room to another, half-heartedly explaining their more rudimentary purposes. Most of the conversation consisted of Benvolio and Cassius’s skillful conversations about astronomy. They moved from one topic to another, Cassius taking as much enjoyment from having someone to converse with as having an excuse to disparage his astronomical rivals.

“Of course the Panzano Observatory is substandard. I toured it two years ago and Cornelio Malvasia
did some very shoddy work. His head was too big for his shoulders, that one. However, our neighbors to the East know the true meaning of scientific artistry. I was fortunate enough to tour Maragheh Observatory and Ulugh Beg Observatory in my youth. Marvelous architecture and such an appreciation for the stars."

They moved to the upper levels, where the Observatory library was and where they housed lesser telescopes and optical equipment to make repairs to the telescope. This is where Cassius rose to his role as tour guide. He eagerly explained the models of telescopes, the improvements over the years and the story of how Verona’s telescope was built. A telescope of this size was still a rarity in the world. Only two or three existed in Europe.

“I was just looking at Saturn this evening,” Cassius said, as he opened the door into the circular room that housed the large telescope. It was larger than a carriage in size. The casing was over ten feet tall. A platform midway up showed where the viewing glass was. “Would you care to join me?”

Benvolio’s face was an open book of pleasure and pride. “Yes, we would be honored.” Tybalt responded likewise.

They spend a few glorious hours under the starlight, looking upon the heavens from their simple perch atop a mountain. No matter how tall or elegantly bedecked their outpost was, or could be if the grandest of observatory ever to exist on earth, it could not compare with the vast, unfathomable reaches of the heavens. The Lord in Heaven created them, but they had since taken on a life of their own, immortalized by the Greeks and Romans and all those that come before, looking up at the same stars, the same celestial bodies and wondered what lay beyond.

Tybalt and Benvolio enjoyed the time spent, peering through the glass at the deepest reaches of the Heavens, beyond what the normal man could spot with his eye. The time was nearing the third hour of the new day when Cassius finally shooed them out of his domain.

“Enough both of you. If we keep this up, you will be here all night. I need sleep. I have things to complete tomorrow.”

Benvolio, who had been yawning with more and more frequency, was profuse in this thanks. “Master Cassius, thank you most heartily for the time you spent with us. Truly, it was an honor.”

“A great honor, one we were lucky enough to obtain,” Tybalt added. “Your generosity knows no bounds.”

“Hah, tell that to the Prince when you see him next. And tell him I need a new assistant. The last one ran off to somewhere or something.”

They left the telescope and returned to the observatory entrance. Benvolio wilted even more now, his energy given permission to leave by his mind, now that nothing new was to be learned.

They bade Cassius farewell as the coachmen prepared for the journey back to Verona.

“Once again, I am deeply in debt to the kindness you have showed us this night. Thank you Cassius,” Benvolio extolled.

“Come back once in a while,” Cassius responded to both their surprise. The old man looked a little sheepish. “It gets lonely up here and you are at least intelligent conversation. Much better than my last assistant.”
“I would be honored,” Benvolio swore fervently.

“Treat him right,” Cassius said, this time addressing Tybalt. “I like this one.”

“Yes, great uncle.” Tybalt responded with a heavy sigh, as though the answer burdened him greatly.

“No respect from family these days,” Cassius grumbled, returning to the observatory.

Benvolio whirled to face Tybalt. “Master Cassius is your kin?”

“Aye, on my mother’s side.”

“And you did not think to tell me?”

“It has never come up before. I spend most of my time with the Capulets, related to me by my aunt, my father’s sister. Although I am friendly with the rest of my family, we are not close, casual acquaintances rather than kin.”

Benvolio hummed in thought. “Very well, I forgive you.”

Tybalt laughed, “Your benevolence is noted.”

The coach rolled up next to them, ready to return them to Verona. Tybalt opened the door for Benvolio, who accepted the hand up gracefully. Tybalt got in after him. The door was firmly shut and a few seconds later the carriage lumbered off into the night.

With Benvolio listless with exhaustion, Tybalt was able to take charge of the position. He settled into one side of the carriage, sitting next to Benvolio, and casually dragged the younger man so he was sinking into a subtle but welcome embrace.

“Sleep Benvolio,” the older man said gently.

“I know what you’re doing here,” Benvolio complained in a faint voice. “You’re trying to seduce me.”

“Is it working?”

Benvolio paused for a long time. Tybalt almost assumed that Benvolio had drifted off into Morpheus’ realm. But the younger man was still awake, clinging to awareness by sheer determination.

“I think it is,” Benvolio admitted, his voice timid and small.

Tybalt, not for the first time, cursed the disaster of their first couple meetings.

“Benvolio,” Tybalt turned slightly, using his hand to tilt Benvolio’s head so their eyes met. “I promise, I will not hurt you anymore. This I swear, on my honor and my family’s honor. I will love you and protect you and cherish you. You are more than what anyone has said you are: weak, cowardly, whore, traitor. You are strong and you are worthy, of anyone’s affections. I would be honored if you would accept my affections as true and honorable, and growing stronger by the day.

“I care deeply for you, Benvolio. I would be honored if you would agree to marry me.”

Benvolio sat in silence. Tybalt felt his heart constrict in an unfamiliar way. Perhaps this is what love was? Or at least the beginnings of it. What if Benvolio denied him?
“My lord Tybalt,” Benvolio finally responded. “I accept your proposal. I am yours and you are mine.”

“That we are,” Tybalt agreed and pulled Benvolio in for a long, passionate kiss.

Chapter End Notes

The poems come from Uthmān Mukhtārī, Sultan Osman II, and Fuzuli.

A disclaimer on the history of observatories: As a rule, Europeans did not develop observatories until the late 1580's. The oldest institutional observatories originated in the Arabic world, where they were highly developed. So, given that Romeo and Juliet is set at least pre-Renaissance, the timeline does not match up. Verona also never had an observatory.
The End

Chapter Notes
See the end of the chapter for notes

“I am most pleased that fruition of this issue is almost at hand, my Lords,” Prince Escalus announced to Lord Capulet and his advisers, Sir Arturo and Sir Giraldo, Lord Capulet’s brothers and part of his inner court. They sat, the four of them - Prince Escalus, Lord Capulet, Sir Arturo and Sir Giraldo - in a comfortable garden patio, drenched by the warming spring sun. Persephone had returned to Olympus and her mother was celebrating, throwing volleys of yellow gorse, wispy pink thistles, daisies, and white climbing roses into the wild Italian landscape. Here in the Palace the carefully manicured lawns and gardens blossomed under the dedicated care of professional horticulturalists.

“We are pleased as well,” Lord Capulet declared. “Benvolio will make an excellent addition to the Capulet Clan.”

“Eggs and chickens, my brother,” Arturo pointed out helpfully and humorous nudge.

“I beg your pardon?” Prince Escalus inquired.

“As Arturo is ever so fond of reminding me, I have a habit of planning and scheming before things are confirmed,” Lord Capulet passed a sour look at his brother.

“He has been doing this since he was but a lad and it upsets him so when things that he cannot control do not go to plan,” Arturo sighed with good humor.

Arturo and Giraldo were alike and dissimilar from their brother in separate ways. Arturo had the lightest complexion and countenance of the three. He was also the youngest. Giraldo was more similar to Antonio, the Lord Capulet, solemn but more lively, since the responsibility and weight of the clan’s well being did not rest on his shoulders.

“In this instance, I believe you will find things are going precisely as I planned,” Lord Capulet shot back.

Prince Escalus lips formed a half smile, confident in the knowledge that his next words would cast trouble into the Capulet’s orderly vision. “I am glad to have the terms proposed. However, I have one more condition. Lord Montague has requested to be included in the eventual ceremony.”

“Lord Montague?”

“Certainly not. He gave up claim to Benvolio, why should he be allowed to even be present?”

“He is not welcome.”

All three brothers spoke at once, their denials quite vocal.

“It is too late, my lords,” Prince Escalus defended. “He has asked and Benvolio has approved the request.” Although the Prince tried to look chagrin at the outraged expressions on his guest, he could not contain the exceedingly pleased expression displayed in the slant of his eyes, the tilt of his head, or the curve of his smile.

“Benvolio did?” Lord Capulet asked shrewdly.
“Aye, that is so. Lord Montague has begged for Benvolio’s forgiveness. Benvolio has accepted a tentative offer of friendship. Anything else is up to the two parties involved.”

Prince Escalus’ knowing grin was what gave the game away to Lord Capulet. Suddenly the events of these last few weeks took on a different slant.

“My dear Prince,” Lord Capulet said. “What part do you suggest Lord Montague will play in this wedding?”

“Why, he will be giving away Benvolio of course. It is his right, since Benvolio is the only link to his brother Lelio that Lord Montague has left. I am sure Lelio would have wanted his dear brother to oversee Benvolio’s transition into a new part of life,” Prince Escalus with an innocent air.

“Will there be any other Montagues in attendance?” Lord Capulet questioned, with barely hidden anger.

“Romeo will be present, of course. I assume Lady Montague will also be there and some of the extended family. Benvolio may not have a family anymore, but he still has friends amongst the Montagues who wish to give him their support.”

“And I suppose banning all the Montagues except the young Roman and Lord Montague is not possible?”

“It is certainly possible,” Prince Escalus said, tapping his chin as though in deep thought. “But it certainly destroys your public persona as the honorable family that would rise above this pointless feud for the same of an innocent youth. By denying that same young man the presence of his semi-redeemed family, it does create a moral dilemma, is that not so?”

Prince Escalus was grinning quite widely now.

Lord Capulet internally cursed. He had played right into Prince Escalus’ hands. Benvolio, for all his desirable qualities, had one that was a blessing and a curse. He was so kind. And that kindness would cause him to forgive his former family. Now they would not tolerate just one Montague. They would have to tolerate an innumerable amount more.

Hellfire and damnation.

“Welcome to the family, officially,” Juliet said with a wink and a nudge. She and Benvolio walked side by side in the early morning market. Up ahead Tybalt and Romeo argued over finding a food stall to break their fast.

Two nights had passed since that night at the observatory. They spent the carriage ride back kissing and necking like young lovers. By the time they returned to the Palace, they were grinding against each other quite feverishly. Benvolio whimpered loudly when the coachman knocked on the door. Before he could open the door, Tybalt yelled, “One second, if you please,” in a very loud, angry voice.

Footsteps receded, signally they were once again left alone. Tybalt reluctantly pulled away, “No more, Benvolio. Not here, not in these circumstances.”

Benvolio sagged against Tybalt in reluctant agreement, his breath coming in harsh pants.

“You have ruined me, sir Tybalt,” Benvolio recovered from their bout. His tone was laughing. “No one will have me now.”
“I am sure your future husband will not be offended at this bit of education,” Tybalt parried.

“Maybe not him, but my current guardian may be,” Benvolio said slyly. “Especially since he entrusted my safety and chastity to you. Marvel at how you almost took my innocence.”

“I am sure the Prince has no aspirations on your mental maturity,” Tybalt returned swiftly. Then just as quickly he paused and changed course. In a softer tone he said, “We never spoke of this matter before this time. Are you indeed still chaste?”

Benvolio spluttered. “Tybalt, there is no need—”

“No, I believe there is every need,” Tybalt interjected. “You have accepted my suit. We are both men of intelligence and of a candide nature. Although I believe ours is a love of the mind first and then the body. Is that not so?” His visage was remarkably serious.

“Aye, this is so,” Benvolio said. He breathed deeply. “Truly Tybalt, thou need not worry. It is truth that I am still a virgin. I know our difference in age is not vast but neither is it small. I presume you have already partaken of the pleasures of the flesh?” Tybalt nodded respectfully. “It does not concern me at all. I accepted from the offset that you are the more experienced.”

Benvolio smiled quietly. “Truthfully, I am more than eager. My inexperience stems from my exacting standards in picking a partner, not a fear of intimacy. As we have already seen, I am more than excited to explore these new pleasures with you.”

“I await that day with baited breath,” Tybalt said warmly. “Thank you, dear heart, for allowing me the pleasure of your education. I promise to cherish and honour it.”

They parted outside the carriage with a more chaste farewell. The next morning, Benvolio had informed Prince Escalus at the morning meal that he had officially agreed to the suit, more than a week before the deadline Benvolio gave at the Prince’s party.

“This is wonderful news,” Prince Escalus said. “I trust you are pleased by this as well.”

When Benvolio smiled, true happiness shined through. “I am. Tybalt and I have spoken many times on this subject. Our start was an unfortunate one, but I believe we are well suited. I will be proud and honored to have him as my husband.”

Princess Adrianne had also offered her congratulations. Prince Escalus vowed to begin talks on prices and the wedding.

“If it is possible, my Prince,” Benvolio request in a soft voice. “Tybalt and I have agreed upon a long engagement.” He looked at the Prince with hopeful eyes.

Prince Escalus softened visibly. “I shall add it to the list of requests for your union. Congratulations on your eventual nuptials.” He left the room.

Benvolio had spent the rest of the day in a sort of fugue state, unable to believe the reality that had come to fruition. He had sent word to Romeo, both of his decision and of an offer for a rendezvous with Tybalt and Juliet the next morning. He penned a shorter missive to Tybalt, containing a thank you for the night before and the time of the rendezvous.

Hearing Juliet’s greeting now, in the present, brought forth the same confused mix of emotions. However, now that someone else acknowledged it, everything felt more real.

“Thank you, dear cousin,” Benvolio said.
“Soon we will be cousins twice over,” Juliet cried in delight.

“Aye, we will,” Benvolio shared in her joy.

“I am pleased you could visit the Capulet Compound,” Juliet leaned toward Benvolio, offering her open hand. Benvolio reciprocated the gesture, grabbing the hand and holding it in a friendly grip. They walked hand and hand for a while, enjoying the pleasant scents, sounds, and sights of the early morning market.

Romeo and Tybalt pulled further ahead, having an argument on what sounded like the benefits of the pastry stall on Via Agripa versus the one off Piazza Rofalco.

Juliet stopped suddenly, staring at Benvolio with a piercing gaze eerily similar to her cousin’s.

“You are happy with this marriage, n’est pa?”

“What?” Benvolio was startled by the unexpected question.

“Young marriage to Tybalt. Please do not think I do not want your to marry Tybalt, because I do. I am thrilled for you to join our family. But I do not wish for you to feel pressured into it, treating it as necessary sacrifice to keep the balance whole.”

“Juliet, I-” Benvolio tried to argue.

“No, Benvolio. Romeo has told me much of your virtues, but he has also let slip some of your vices as well. Do not deny you would do this, would sacrifice yourself so that Romeo and I would by happy.” Juliet argued

Unbeknownst to Juliet, Benvolio had been pondering this very quandary for some time.

“Dear Juliet,” Benvolio responded with due levity. “I do not deny that those thoughts first factored into my decision to accept a suit with Tybalt when the idea was first proposed. Escalus is the Prince of Verona first and foremost and I knew he saw this as a political move to end the feud. I was content in my lot, to follow this throw as far as it would go, whether to delay and distract or as a martyr.

“But,” he continued. “Your cousin has changed that. I may not love him with the passion and soul that you and Romeo have for one another. But I do love him all the same. It is a small delicate flower, planted in the ashes of a burnt volcano. But those areas often have the most nutrient of soil and we have both shared the burden equally to make sure it will flourish. I would marry Tybalt now even without the added distractions. I am his and he is mine.”

Later that day Tybalt questioned Juliet on the serious conversation he had witnessed that morning.

“What were my delicate cousin and my dear husband to be discussing this morning, Juliet?”

The two cousins partook in a stroll through Juliet’s garden after a leisurely day in the city with Romeo and Benvolio.

“I am sure I have no idea,” Juliet answered loftily. “How could I possibly know?”

“I was certain I saw you talking in a most severe manner with my Benvolio this morning as we sought a pastry stall, was that not so?” Tybalt responded, his voice teasingly surprised.

“Lies and slander, good sir. Benvolio and I had a series of lively and friendly conversations about nothing in particular,” Juliet argued.
The day had been well spent. They had walked around the city then spent the afternoon on the River Adige, in a borrowed boat, taking turns at rowing between fishing vessels and pleasure craft alike. As the sun set, Tybalt had taken a reluctant Juliet home. They passed through her deserted garden on the way to her room. Tybalt stopped them in an alcove to better interrogate his cousin.

“I mean it Juliet. If you said something to harm Benvolio, whether meant meanly or not. You may be my cousin, but Benvolio is mine.”

Unexpectedly, Juliet broke out into a genuine smile. “That is what he said as well. That he was yours and you were his.”

“Aye, that is what marriage is. I have already stated my intentions to him very clearly,” Tybalt responded, flummoxed at her good humor.

“This I know, but I could not help but be concerned for him,” Juliet responded. “The fault in these events lay with Romeo and I, not you and Benvolio. I did not want him pushed into a marriage he did not want because he was too kind and good-hearted to say no.”

“The fault is not completely yours, cousin,” Tybalt reminded her gently. “Have you forgotten mine and Mercutio’s ill-fated duel? Benvolio was almost killed. He was banish’d.”

“But the Prince would have taken him in regardless. Then he would have been free to be wedded in his own time, to an individual of his choosing. Because of mine and Romeo’s marriage, he has chosen to wed you instead, to prevent an outright civil war in Verona!”

Juliet’s declaration, raised at the end, resounded loudly in the quiet garden. Tybalt was about to warn her to be more quiet when the unthinkable happen.

From behind Tybalt, a deadly calm voice asked, “What did you say, daughter of mine?” They whirled around and came face to face with the thunderous expression of Lord Capulet.

“Uncle!” Tybalt exclaimed. Even his profound, feline-like reflexes had been at a loss to detect the foreigner in their shared garden. Still, he rallied quickly, standing and placing himself in front of Juliet, a shield against Lord Capulet’s fearsome anger. “Such a pleasing day it is. How lovely to see you. What brings you to this fair garden on an afternoon such as this?”

“What brings me here is nowhere near important now. Unless mine ears deceive me, which is not so, I am led to believe that my daughter, my Juliet, is a married woman!”

“You must have misheard, uncle,” Tybalt soothed. “Juliet was proclaiming thoughts about her future husband and-”

“Do not toy with me, boy,” Lord Capulet snarled. “I have been lenient with you for many things but this is not something I will take with any humor.”

Lord Capulet stood, every inch of him furious with rage, a lion in full roar.

“Good Tybalt,” Juliet counseled. “The time for trickery and deceit is over. We must all atone for our sins at some time, and mine have been building for some time.” She laid a hand on Tybalt’s arm, taking her place beside her cousin as together they faced down their Lord.

“My daughter,” Lord Capulet bit out, controlled anger whipping at its reins. “Please explain the situation in succinct and honest terms. And then I will decide whether or not to give you to a nunnery.”
“My lord father,” began Juliet. “I am a married woman. The day after our Masquerade, I married Romeo of the Montagues in the Benedictine Abbey. Father Laurence presided. That afternoon, Tybalt and Mercutio fought, injuring Benvolio. I misheard the situation later and ran to the Abbey to find Romeo. Prince Escalus was already there and Romeo and I confess our marriage to him and Benvolio. The Prince reluctantly gave his blessing to the union, and together we began to plot a bloodless way to end this silly feud. Thus far,” Juliet said, looking very smug indeed. “It has all gone according to the path laid out by Prince Escalus.”

“The Prince is a wise man,” Lord Capulet admitted with a growl, his anger still high. “And an admirable strategist.”

“He is a very generous ruler, to aid two young souls who know nothing of the world at large. I dread to think of what may have happened without his intervention.” Juliet confessed.

“The Prince is a shrewd and calculating ruler,” Capulet snarled back. “That cad knew I could not, would not act. Mark you this, he has been waiting, biding his time for the right leverage. And now he has found it. My daughter! Mine own blood kin has ruined us!”

“Ruined you! Say it is not so, father!” Juliet shouted back. Her anger, more often as not, was non existent, a ripple or two on a calm pond. In the rare moments of unfined fury, she acted with the explosive and chaotic nature of Neptune, known to all as Earthshaker and Stormbringer. “It is you, and your father and your father’s father, whose senseless anger and useless pride brings us all to the brink of destruction. Blame me not, for the ills which you create.

“I may have wronged you, by lying and acting without your permission. As my lord father, it is your right to arrange my marriage. For that I apologize. But I will not apologize for loving Romeo. That is something I cannot, I will not do.”

She panted heavily, staring at her father with solemn eyes. “Cast me adrift if you wish, my Lord. Strip me of my name, my family, my title, my own identity. I have said my peace. Romeo is my husband, and nothing, not the Lord above, and certainly not you, will ever tear us asunder.”

Juliet stood straight, a goddess in mortal form, holding her head high for a few, definitive seconds. Then she whirled in a sweep of rich fabrics and left the garden.

Silence.

Tybalt allowed his uncle to wallow in the silence wrought by Juliet’s righteous anger. Like the calm that came the morning after an especially harsh thunderstorm, it was heavy and poient.

“She is very much your daughter, my Lord,” the younger man finally pronounced, his tone solemn but with humor twinkling in his eye.

“I need not your cheek,” the lord rumbled.

“Yes my Lord,” Tybalt said pleasantly.

More silence.

“Though one supposes the fault is mine,” the older man finally relented.

“I could not say, my Lord,” Tybalt said, still in a pleasant, almost smug tone.

“Enough of you,” Lord Capulet groused. “Begone!”
“Yes, my Lord.” Tybalt made to follow Juliet out of the garden.

“Yes, my Lord.” Tybalt made to follow Juliet out of the garden.

“Wait, nephew!” The call came seconds later, causing Tybalt to turn and return from whence he came.

Lord Capulet expression had calmed from furious to pensive.

“When did you know?”

“I discovered the truth less than a fortnight ago. She has done well in her subterfuge.”

“Too well. She is still a girl.”

“But she knows her heart and her mind. The heart wants and the head follows. Especially when paired with admirable compatriots.”

“Your young man knew.” There was an accusatory note in his voice.

“Aye, he discovered after the fact, with the Prince. What’s more, he was sensible enough to suspect before hand.”

“He is a find, my nephew. And he has been aiding them?”

“As much as they need it. With current upsets, there has been ample time for chicanery and subterfuge.”

“So it seems.”

Silence.

“Is what Juliet said the truth?”

“It was at the beginning. But we have come far, uncle. Benvolio is mine and I am his. I care for him deeply and he returns those feelings.”

Lord Capulet softened. “Good. It gladdens my heart to hear this. I never did want either you or Juliet to end up in a loveless, hellish marriage. At least I have been able to procure a joyful marriage for you. Juliet on the other hand, had the good sense to go and find one for herself.”

Romeo breathed a deep lungful of air, fresh and pure, smelling faintly of the fresh herbs and spices growing in Friar Lawrence’s garden. Juliet sighed next to him, her head leaning against his shoulder.

“I am sorry, my dear husband,” she apologized for approximately the third time that night. Her large brown eyes turn on him soulfully.

“You already have my forgiveness,” Romeo replied in a soft voice. “We knew this would happen eventually. The truth will out. The Prince has already set the stage.”

“That I know. Mine lord father was not impressed after the meeting with Prince Escalus to discuss Benvolio’s suite. Ever since then he has been pacing, muttering,” Juliet flashed a smile. “Brooding.”

“The Prince is most wise. His plan is coming to fruition. And think, he did not set a time for the main event. It was meant to happen when emotions and actions changed. And things are changing now. Your father knows this more than most.”
“Aye, he does.”

“And now we will tell my father,” Romeo said with a sigh.

“From your words, he has made a most valiant attempt to treat with Benvolio, no matter who he will be marrying,” Juliet tried to pacify.

“Truth.” Romeo still did not seem convinced.

“He will be here soon,” Juliet said. “You sent for him nearly an hour ago.”

This much was true. Romeo had been at Friar Lawrence’s garden in the Benedictine Monastery, helping the good Friar prepare some herbs for drying when Juliet entered. She was near distraught but hiding it behind a mask of determination.

“My lord father knows,” she said, her voice aquiver.

Romeo swept her into his arms, “Tell me.”

She recounted the troubled, turbulent conversation.

Romeo gave her a troubled smile. “It is a testament to Prince Escalus and my dear Benvolio that Tybalt did not cut off my head and testicles the moment he discovered our union.”

Juliet huffed a laugh. “Aye, this is true.”

Romeo pondered a moment then he took action. He left Juliet’s embrace and found a wandering probationary student. He wrote two quick notes and bid the student send on to Prince Escalus and the other to his lord father.

He returned to Juliet and explained his reasoning.

“The Prince obviously needs to know of this development, on the chance that your father has not already made an appearance yet. Considering your father, he will go to Prince Escalus within the day. I would like to give the Prince warning. However, I am also willing to give mine father the benefit of the doubt. Benvolio’s fate has hurt him greatly. Given the opportunity to do the right thing, with the proper explanation, I believe he would support us and rally with the Prince.”

“From your descriptions of thine father, I would agree with your reasoning,” Juliet said.

They passed the time making quiet conversation, waiting with cautious anxiety from Lord Montague to arrive.

The sound of the door opening came from inside the Monastery. Romeo separated from his lady wife, but still kept her right hand firmly in this left one. One of the students entered and showed Lord Antonio Montague into the garden.

Romeo walked forward, leading Juliet with their joined hands. “My lord father,” he greeted.

Lord Montague stared at his son, his gaze moving from Romeo to Juliet to their joined hands in turn. “An explanation would be appreciated, if you please, my son.”

“Lord Antonio Montague, I would like to present to you my wife, Lady Juliet, formerly of the House Capulet. Juliet, this is my lord father.”

“Your wife?” Lord Montague’s tone was soft; not angry but very surprised. “When did this occur?”
“Almost five weeks prior. We married the afternoon after the Masquerade in Friar Lawrence’s cell.”

“That afternoon, the same one in which Benvolio was injured?”

“Aye.”

“And that is why you would not fight with Tybalt?”

His father knew him too well. “Aye. Tybalt was at that moment my kin.”

“Did Benvolio know?”

“Not until after the duel. He found out the same as the Prince, after Juliet sought us out at the abbey to confirm my health.”

“The Prince knows?”

“All this and more. I am afraid, father, that the Prince has more than used this to his advantage to end the feud as quickly as the gods allow.”

“Benvolio’s suite,” Lord Montague breathed, the revelations springing forth. “I thought it happened rather quickly, for Benvolio’s taste. But knowing of this marriage, the lack of dowry, Benvolio’s union would keep the power balanced until agreements could be made to reimburse each family.”

“The Prince was afraid that Lord Capulet might accuse the Montagues of kidnapping Juliet and forcing the marriage, like a barbarian might do to a war bride. This way, both sides are linked prior.” Romeo said, shrugging his shoulders guiltily. Truthfully that line of thought hadn’t even occurred to him until recently, but it was an reasonable justification for the Capulets to go to war, nevermind that his and Juliet’s union had been a unpredictable, fanciful act between two youths rather than a planned attack on one family by the other.

“And Verona will not descend into open warfare.” Lord Montague was nodding along with the logic. “I see the Prince’s hand in this. And as well I see the wisdom in his actions. Open warfare holds no appeal for me.”

Romeo chanced a small smile at his father, continuing to hold Juliet’s hand. He squeezed it gently in reassurance. His normally vocal and passionate father was taking it better than expected.

Lord Montague caught the gesture. “Well, my manners have indeed escaped me.” The older man approached, holding his arms open. “Let me look at you, daughter.”

Juliet entered the embrace shyly, “My Lord Montague.”

The older man swept her into a warm embrace. “Welcome to the family, dear Juliet.” He kissed both of her checks and then held her at arms length, “My wife and I were not blessed with a daughter. I hope you do not mind if we spoil you like our own.”

“Not at all, my Lord.”

“Come now, it is not pleasant to stand on formalities with my new daughter. I know you already have a father, so that epithet is already used. If you so choose, please call me Antonio.”

“Thank you, Lord Antonio,” Juliet responded. She was flushed with happiness as the warm reception Romeo’s father gave her. It warmed Romeo’s heart to see two of the most important people in his life meeting for the first time. “I am honored to join your family.”
“The honor is all ours, dear daughter.” Lord Montague returned Juliet to Romeo’s care. Then he address his son. “I trust there was an event that sparked this action, like a lightning strike starts a forest fire?”

“Aye, father. This afternoon Lord Capulet also discovered the truth.”

“By accident I presume? It was not a planned decision?”

“Nay, it was not,” Juliet confirmed. “I am ashamed, twas my fault. I was not careful enough. I was discussing my union with Tybalt when my Lord Father entered the garden and overheard. He was enraged and I responded in kind.” She looked down, nervously wringing her skirt in her hand.

“Your cousin Tybalt knows?” Lord Montague asked, unable to hide his shock.

“Yes, sir, but only very recently. He discovered the truth after the Prince’s party.”

“And what was his reaction?”

Juliet shared a small smile with Romeo. “Prince Escalus’ plan worked to perfection. Tybalt was affronted, but not surprised or vengeful.”

“Divine intervention appears before us. Truly the Prince is a Saint and this is his miracle manifested.”

“You jest father, but the danger is more real than ever. Lord Capulet is probably even now storming into the Palace, demanding satisfaction.” Romeo cried, his worry getting the best of him for the first time this night.

Lord Montague laughed, “And tear asunder his hard won public victory? I think not. I have known Vincente Capulet our whole lives. Much like Tybalt and Mercutio, there has always been bad blood. But even in this, there is knowledge and cunning. Lord Capulet is proud and, what’s more, he is insightful. He knows he has no leverage. The Prince has won, checkmated the both of us with our own pieces. The only thing left to do is mitigate the damage.”

“How do we achieve that aim?” Juliet asked.

“You do nothing,” Lord Montague replied, looking fondly at his son and new daughter. “You have done your part, created a change so large it will eclipse everything. Now it is up to us. I will go forth to the Palace tomorrow and treat with the Prince. Lord Capulet will no doubt do the same sometime in the following days. Together, the three of us, united as one for the first time, will end this feud.”

The morning dawned bright and early. Lord Antonio Montague was up with the cock’s crow, determined to win any advantage he could.

Last night’s revelation had been a shock. As though Zeus came down from Olympus and struck him with his lightning bolt. It was divine in its inspirations and life altering in the same way a thief is suddenly struck by the divine and becomes a pious monk the next day. So great was the revelation that Morpheus evaded him all night.

It did ensure that he arrived at the Palace just after the sixth bell chimed that morning. The city was just waking from its slumber, farmers’ carts noisily clacked over uneven cobblestones on the way to set up market stalls.

The Lord Montague breathed in the smell of the city, savoring this moment of peace. However up ahead, in front of the Palace’s gates was a sight that made him stop.
And stare in avid confusion.

Silence.

Cautiously he approached.

Lord Vincente Capulet stood, hands clasped behind his back, dignified and erect. For all the world, he appeared to be waiting. Evidently he was waiting for Montague himself, for the other lord called a greeting.

“Good morrow to you, Lord Montague.” The voice was lacking its usual fury or disgust present all other times Montague had heard it.

“To you as well, Lord Capulet,” Montague responded, with an inclination now as to the impetus behind this complete change. “May I be the first to offer you felicitations on your daughter’s marriage.”

“So they did inform you,” Capulet asked in a slow manner.

“Aye, last night. Lady Juliet and Romeo believed we should be on equal footing for the conversation ahead.”

“My daughter?”

“She was at the Benedictine Abbey last night with Romeo,” Lord Montague explained. “I do have the thought that the status quo would have been kept if not for a certain Friar.”

“I have half a mind to slit the man’s throat while he sleeps, holy father or not,” Capulet grumbled. “That old man is far too meddlesome.”

“Truth you speak, but the consequences of this plot are ones I can live with,” Montague said softly, looking out to the River Adige. It sparkled in the morning sun, just peeking over the roofs of the city.

“Your Benvolio banish’d?” A sly jab.

“But Benvolio is alive. My son is alive. Such things may not have happened had Romeo and Juliet’s deceit been discovered in another way.” Montague rallied.

Capulet, to Montague’s surprise, did not rise to a debate. Montague looked closer, seeing for the first time the weariness and burden that must be mirrored on his own shoulders. Both of them had come very close to losing their children.

“Mayhap this is Lady Hera or Lady Hestia’s favor to us. Good marriages and families preserved, our hearths ever lit, warm, and welcome to all,” Montague offered after a bout of silence

“Lady Hestia, I would believe,” Capulet offered. “I believe our dear Benvolio is one of her favorites. It must be him that made this all possible.”

“Do not speak of that in front of him,” Montague cautioned. “Our Benvolio is extremely shy in the compliments he receives. I have tried to break him of this habit, but he continues to curl inward, like a hedgehog on the defense.”

“Tybalt may very well make inroads where you have failed,” Capulet objected. “My nephew adores Benvolio and is more than vocal in his criticisms and praises alike.”

“I am glad of it,” Lord Montague admitted it. “I have watched your family for all my life, seen how
you, Tybalt, and the rest of the Capulets have grown. Tybalt is an honorable man. Although I would
not have picked him for Benvolio’s suiter, I see now they are well matched for each other.” He felt a
momentary pang of loss at the thought of Benvolio’s fate.

“Benvolio is a treasure. Tybalt and the rest of the House of Capulet will treat him with the respect
and adoration he deserves,” Lord Capulet stated firmed. “This I so swear, by Lady Hestia and the
Lord above.”

“I, and the rest of the Montagues, will do the same for Lady Juliet,” Lord Montague promised. “This
I so swear, by Lady Hestia and the Lord above.”

They shared a moment of silence, in complete agreement for the first time in their entire lives.

A new feeling of calm settled over both of them. A truce had been reached. Peace was imminent.

The silence lasted as they turned together, entering the Palace. They announced their entrance to the
steward who showed them into a spare drawing room.

A quarter of an hour later, the Prince arrived. The two Lords stood and offered respectful nods.
“Prince Escalus,” Lord Capulet greeted. Montague echoed the greeting.

“This is a shock, most certainly,” Prince Escalus announced. “I was waiting to see signs of the
apocalypse when my steward informed me of your arrival together. The river flowing backwards or
the sun falling from the sky. Surely nature itself must be confused if the natural order of your feud is
so disrupted.” He fixed both Lords with a penetrating stare, an angry frown maring his normally
pleasant face.

Lord Montague made to answer, to object, to argue but Prince Escalus cut him off.

“No excuse, Montague. Either of you. This has gone on long enough. I am no longer satisfied with
violence in my streets at the slightest provocation. I am no longer satisfied with damaged goods and
damaged lives. I am no longer satisfied by your pointless feud. For centuries mine own kin hath tried
to end this, for all the good in the world. Where they have failed, I will succeed. Thus I say: no more.
This feud has already ended, with the marriages of Romeo and Juliet and Benvolio and Tybalt.
Capulets and Montagues.

“One union was that of youths struck by quick and fanciful youthful love. The other will be that of
intelligent planning and careful forethought. Both are equal, one no less meaningful than the other.
What makes them worthy, necessary, and wholly good are the peace they will bring to this city.
Those four decided to take action, and have done more to end this feud than any of my family have
managed in the last three hundred years.

“It is their courage that acted to a catalyst in this whole affair. Now it is seen through light of day,
through a new generation that can learn to forgive and kindle kindness in their breast. This feud is at
its end.”

He paused, waiting for his audience to digest those strong words.

“It is up to you two, Lords of Two Noble Houses, to decide what your role in this affair will be. The
next generation has already laid their hearts bare; Romeo and Juliet and Benvolio and Tybalt. Now it
is your turn.”

Lord Capulet and Lord Montague sat in silence for a time. They sat at either end of a lush settee in
the Prince’s drawing room, neither willing to break the harsh and heavy silence.
“Well my Lords? What be your answer?”

“It seems like we have no choice,” Lord Capulet broke first. “Juliet is mine only daughter and I love her so. It is as you say: the feud is over. It is cast up in flames, burnt to the ashes. From those cooling embers, a new order will arise. One I intend to be a part of.” Lord Capulet looked at Lord Montague now, for the first time since they entered the room. “The House of Capulet’s feud with the Montagues is now over.”

Lord Capulet’s clear voice rang out in the room, its strong order heard and obeyed by the soul of Verona.

Prince Escalus nodded in pleased support. He turned to look at the other man. “Lord Montague, what’s say you?”

“My Prince, there is nothing I can say. This feud and my foolish actions have cost me my own nephew and have almost cost me my son as well. I dare not try to reclaim Benvolio, for I hear he has already been claimed by a rather possessive mate, but at least this way, Romeo and perhaps Benvolio will know thy still have a home with the us if they so choose. As Lord Montague, I accept Lord Capulet’s overture. Our feud is officially ended.”

Chapter End Notes

The end! Admittedly, I will hopefully try to come back to this a write a couple postscripts. I think that would be fun. But I'm glad this is finally finished. It was about 10 years in the making but it is finally over. Thank you to all who have read and enjoyed this. I am gratified by everyone's positive feedback.

Credit to Rick Riordan for the Earthshaker and Stormbreaker line. One of the best. And a lot of the inspiration for the Greek Mythology. Also credit to Ken Ludwig and all the Shakespeare reference in his play adaption of Treasure Island. I wrote a significant amount of this story during Tech Week when I was Assistant Lighting Designer for our production of it.

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