

## Juliet

The house was bustling with excitement and anticipation. Juliet observed from afar. She thought vaguely that she did not belong here anymore and perhaps she did not want to. All her life she had been a Capulet, but suddenly the label didn't seem to fit. Was she a Montague? Juliet preferred to think that she was simply *Juliet*... free, without any obligations or expectations attached.

The Nurse came hurrying towards her for approval on some item for the wedding. She was red-faced and out of breath, but then, the Nurse was frequently breathless, especially when her input was required. "What do you think, Juliet?"

"It looks fine," she replied demurely. Another question was on the Nurse's lips, and Juliet spoke quickly to prevent it. "I'm so tired. Please let me go to sleep now, Nurse. You know I have much on my mind." There was something between them that had not been there before, a result of private knowledge. They shared a secret, and though she knew the Nurse would never quite understand, she offered something as close to understanding as Juliet had ever known and could ever hope to receive.

Before the Nurse could respond, her mother entered the chamber, agitated and occupied with other thoughts. "Do you need my help with anything?"

"No," Juliet said at once. "I think everything is ready. But if you'll excuse me, I'd like to get some sleep now."

Her mother nodded. She suspected nothing. There was both relief and resentment with this realization. "Alright. Come, Nurse. There is still much to do. You must be well-rested for tomorrow, Juliet." She swept out of the room and the Nurse scuttled after. That was all.

The vial was hid beneath her pillow. Juliet lifted it slowly with the unsettling feeling that she was cradling her life in her hands.

*Thoughts flurried through Juliet's mind as she emerged onto the balcony. The night was calm and quiet, but the cool breeze was refreshing on her rosy cheeks. They were still flushed, hours after they had leaned in towards him... hours after she had spoken and laughed and her life had opened suddenly.*

*There had been so little to it before. Now life contained emotions Juliet had not known she was capable of feeling. Such depth. Frightening and exhilarating intensity. "Romeo..." she*

*murmured, and her voice blended with the wind. The leaves on the old tree rustled softly, as if joining in her whispered reverie.*

*She jumped when he responded. Leaning over the great stone railing of the balcony, she saw him shrouded in the bushes. "What are you doing here?" she said at once. "Who are you?" she added, though she had known the moment his voice had reached her.*

*"I don't know what to call myself," he answered. "I'm afraid my name will only cause trouble."*

*The remembrance of who he was and what was between them struck her with heavy realization. But the longer she reflected, the less it seemed to matter, the more there was nothing of any weight to life but this.*

*"Come again tomorrow," she told him.*

The potion sparkled within its container, catching the light in a way that filled her with foreboding. The rashness of her course overwhelmed her. It was so unlike anything she had ever done, unlike the passive existence she had led prior to this point. She was about to take action and secure her future within her own grasp. And yet this action would render her helpless: vulnerable to fate, perhaps loosening her grasp on the things she wanted most.

How did she know she could trust him?

He had sounded so sincere, but if she died, he stood to gain a secure, unblemished reputation. Her secret marriage to Romeo threatened his honour. Who was to say he wasn't scheming to obscure his role in their nuptials forevermore? He was a holy man, Juliet reasoned, but despite her justifications, the doubts plagued her incessantly, lurking in the back of her mind even when she wasn't consciously thinking at all.

*The light was spilling over the tops of the trees and bathing the world in joy and warmth. But to Juliet, the golden glow sent an uneasy sensation creeping across her skin. She felt numb. "You have to go," she said. How could one go back to life after this?*

*"One more kiss," he insisted. "Then I'll go down."*

*She obliged, but the embrace only heightened her desire for escape, to shed her former self and be only who she was with him. He lingered, then began to climb down the balcony, gripping the ivy that descended the wall tightly. "Will I ever see you again?"*

*"Of course you will." He leapt to the ground and gazed up at Juliet one last time. "Trust me," he said.*

She trusted Romeo, of course, but plans were built on shifting sand and did not always unfurl properly. What if he did not arrive in time? An image flashed through Juliet's mind with alarming clarity and speed. She was lying in an earthy tomb and the dirt pressed up against her. She writhed, but the walls closed in around her and she could not free her arms from her sides. Breathing was a struggle: the space was so tight and the air was so thin. Suddenly a bony arm reached out, emerging from the dirt. *Tybalt*. How many other dead bodies lay here and how long would it be before she joined them?

The thought of awaking alone in that suffocating tomb filled her with terror, terror so great and so real that she gasped for air, as though she was already trapped inside the dark grave. She could not escape the fear, but there was nothing else, no better alternatives that had presented themselves. The idea of staying here was impossible. There was nothing else but him and there was no one here who would ever understand, anyways.

*"Aren't you thankful?" her father demanded. "An unworthy little girl like you should be proud to call Paris her husband."*

*"I could never be proud of what I hate," she responded, and the spirit in her words surprised her as she heard them.*

*"Ungrateful wretch," he spat at her.*

*"Please, father. Listen to me." She asked, but she didn't expect him to. He never had and it was foolish to think he would now.*

*"Quiet!" he roared. "You will marry Paris or you will leave as no daughter of my mine."*

*Her voice was clear in her mind but stifled in his presence. He didn't listen, yet she also never spoke. She didn't know how. Not with him.*

For a moment, she allowed herself to imagine their reactions. Would regret flicker through their thoughts, even briefly?

It was too much to hope for, but she hoped anyways. She opened the vial and held it close to her lips. "Romeo," she whispered, and then tilted the contents back into her mouth. The liquid swished down her throat and she shuddered. Her last thought was of his face and then she succumbed to the blackness: *falling, falling, gone.*