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Behind the Silent Mask

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Behind the Silent Mask

'She'll not be hit with Cupid's arrow; she hath Dian's wit'

Romeo and Juliet Act 1 scene 1, 201-02

Verona's streets were stained with feuding blood, the stamp and seal that the Capulets and Montagues had bestowed on our city. I, too weak a witness, wept at the sight. I had stared out this casemate window from the earliest days of my youth, but a mask of anger had long hid the face of our fair Verona so that not even I could recognize her magnificent features. Hate drove the city, and I no more could abide it.

"Sweet Rosaline," I was wrenched from my contemplation of Verona's streets by a pair of delicate arms wrapped around my shoulders.

"My lady Juliet." I embraced my dearest, my only friend, my cousin Juliet of the house of Capulet. But her rosy cheeks were flushed with a different heat tonight. "What troubles you? Your face is both pale like death and red in anger."

"Neither death nor anger. 'Tis confusion. My mother lately called me and spoke to me on marriage, and I not yet past the age of ten and four with no love for any man."

"Has she someone in mind? Has a man made intentions known to your father?"

"Aye. Count Paris. Though him I do not know. But speak no more of this, for I wish to enjoy the festivities. But what? For your eyes betray some deeper feelings. You too have heavy

news. What? Won't thou tell me? Fie, you only whisper to the moon, for Diana is your patroness."

"And you Apollo's playmate. But I shall tell you. It is the feud between your house and that of the Montagues. Such death and blood was shed today at market. I myself was there. My eyes traced the livery of both families across the square before the skirmish started, and I knew what was to come. Lord Benvolio, a cousin to the Montagues, drew forth his sword and called for peace, he stood between the angered parties. But his words were not enough. I hid with my maid behind a cart, and we cowered there until the prince rode forth, all anger and justice. And you know the rest from there."

Our conversation was in a secluded alcove, but before I continued, I peered outside our confines to see that no prying ears, as of our cousin Tybalt, would overhear my slanders and rage.

"Why must your father persist in this feud? Does he not see the blood? The death? The pain, the tears, the weeping? What origins are there of this feud, so angry in its right? For have it any right to be so angry at all? Or is it a simple quarrel of men, grown out of hand like a rose bush unpruned? With thorns to match the blood red buds?"

My hands were white where I gripped the folds of my skirt until they were pried apart by her much lighter touch.

"Calm yourself, precious friend. You know as well as I that as maids there is nothing we can do with our fragile lives to calm a feud. Perhaps in death as saints in heaven our prayers may have more sway."

I made no reply, and she made no remark. She studied the flicker of a candle's flame, and I could see its reflection in her eyes. I turned to study the moon's light beam, each of us basking in our respective elements.

"Come daughter, come niece! Your eyes are dark, lighten your heels with dancing," Lord Capulet bid us before he turned to greet a drove of masqueraders. One guest was a fellow in a Doctor of Pestilence mask who, despite his mask's meaning, was jovial. His companion to his left was a fellow in a Gnaga style mask, who was quiet and respectful as my uncle rambled. On the other side of the Doctor of Pestilence was a man in a Bauta mask, and in his stately mask and with his stately carriage, he cast the other two into shadow.

"Come, Juliet, let us tie on our happy faces and play the part of fool as we jig about the room," I said as she knotted the ribbon of my star studded mask.

"But let us jig as you and I. I have no taste for being Love's fool this night."

Our shadows and our steps echoed around the marble hall. The recorder and the lute too quiet a beat maker to follow, we danced to the tune of raucous conversation. Juliet squeezed my hand as we spun. Her eyes darted to a figure in another set, watching her.

"'Tis Count Paris, my would-be betrothed," her words were whispered urgently in my ear as we twirled past each other in the dance.

Though Count Paris was not a graceful dancer, I realized as I watched him blunder through the bassadanza. He was a respectable fellow, if not twice Juliet's young age. From behind Count Paris, I saw more eyes following the merry line of lady dancers. Upon my cousin Livia gazed the boy in Gnaga mask, whose eyes then flicked to me. The Doctor of Pestilence appeared from behind a pillar, but they had not long alighted on my face than he was distracted

and looked like a man blinded by the sun. Whoever this lad was, he had spied my tender Juliet. The dance ended ere I marked this, and found in the stranger and Juliet a short exchange of glances.

A crowd circled the dance floor as one of Capulet's men began a song. Through the veil of people I searched for Juliet. But instead I found Livia's admirer, still in contemplation of her beauty. He had some trace features which I did note as familiar. But the light of recognition did but throw a shadow over the night. He was a Montague.

"Juliet? Juliet?" I circled the room, searching for my friend.

"The fair Rosaline,"

I turned and spied a gentleman wearing the prince's colors and the Bauta mask.

"You have me at a disadvantage sir, you not only know my name yet make judgement upon my character, and I know none of you." My curtsy allowed me time to look him up and down.

"As fair of tongue as face. Indeed, a fair tongue in a fair face, and as bright an eye to match."

"Mercutio!" The admirer of Livia chided the fellow.

"Mercutio? Then I was wrong, I do know you sir, to be a kinsman of the prince."

He twirled his wrist and bowed too low. "And how dost thou tonight?"

"I am well, my lord." His gaze was harsh and unabashed on my face, the vessels of his eyes bursting red under the slits of his mask. There was a strange power behind his looks, as if

the curve of my lips or gleam of my eye would give him answers. I found this uncomfortable and all too familiar a thing for a stranger.

“Is not the moon bright tonight?”

“Too soon it will be overshadowed by the sun. Does thou know Romeo of the house of Montague?”

I let his question grow rich with time like the wine we feasted with. The only revelers nearby had been made too merry by drink or were too loud to have heard his question, and therefore my answer.

“I do not know the face, yet I know the name. He is the heir of Lord Montague.”

“But do you know him?” Mercutio stepped closer. Benvolio placed a hand on Mercutio’s chest. His insinuations drove heat to my cheeks, but my anger was the stain that kept it there.

“My lord, I do not.”

“He means no such thing, Lady Rosaline. We bid you adieu and leave with the moon, for the sun calls us.”

“Good day, my lords.” But I doubted they could hear me as Benvolio hook Horatio’s arm and dragged him far from the revelries.

“Rosaline, Rosaline!” Lord Capulet came tapping at my shoulder. “But stay you a moment. Are so soon those two young gentlemen drove away from you? Let woe not fill you, and instead wait for a slight sweet feast to end the eve.”

“Indeed my lord, I have no stomach for sweet love or sweet meats. G’night.”

With a curtsy I left him and the merry revelers. Fools in masks only fooled themselves. I had no reason to deceive myself. I found a bench in the courtyard beside the wall and let my thoughts raise to the celestial heavens.

Fools danced in war. Fools sang of love to cover their battle cries. Fools pretended that their silly feud wasn't tearing apart Verona one street, one family, one love at a time. I was sick of the dancing, sick of the songs, sick of the feud and the blood. Everyday brought more death. Every sunrise heralded in the spilling of blood. We were all safe in the night, when the quiet silence ruled our hearts. But maybe, someday, when the sun set, it would herald peace for the night, and every sunrise and sunset to follow.

I traced the movements of the moon as it rose and sunk in the sky. In the distance I could hear leaving revelers calling 'adieu' to their friends. No more music swelled in the night air. There was no more partying. With the rise of the sun there was no more night. Already the night's mask was slipping off the face of the earth. It was time for me to leave. Until another night, for while the sun was queen of heavens I did disappear.