



# PRINCE OF SHADOWS

A SAMPLER



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## PROLOGUE

I stood in the dark corner of my enemy's house, and thought of murder.

In his bed, Tybalt Capulet snored and drooled like a toothless old woman. I marvelled as I thought of how the women of Verona – from dewy-eyed maids to dignified ladies – fell swooning in his wake. If they could see him like this (a drunken, undignified mess in sodden linen) they'd have run shrieking to the arms of their fathers and husbands.

It would make a good, vivid story to retell, but only among my closest and dearest.

I turned a dagger restlessly in my gloved hand, feeling that murderous tingle working its way through my veins, but I was no assassin. I was not here to kill. I'd come stealthily into his house, into his rooms, for a purpose.

Tybalt, the heir of Capulet, swaggered the streets of Verona and used wit like weapons; that was nothing new among our class of young cocks. He was never above offering insults, to low or high, when opportunity came. Today, he'd offended my house. House of Montague.

The victim was a serving girl. Insults to servants didn't call for open challenges from those of my station, but still, it pricked me, seeing the self-satisfied grin on Tybalt's face as he emerged from that rank little alcove

where he'd reduced her to tears; I'd seen her run from him, red-faced, holding the tattered rags of her clothes together. He'd injured the girl only to prove his contempt for my house, and that required an answer.

It required revenge, and that was something that I, Benvolio Montague, would serve him – not in the streets, in open war, but here, in the dark. Tonight, I was clad head to toe in disguise, and there was nothing about me to indicate my station, or my house. Tonight, I was a thief – the best thief in Verona. They called me the Prince of Shadows. For three years, I had stolen from my peers without being caught, and tonight . . . tonight would be no different.

Except that it was different. My hands felt hot and restless. So easy to drag a dagger across that hated throat, but murder spawned murder, and I didn't want to kill Tybalt. There had been enough of that between our two houses; the streets ran slick with spilt blood. No . . . I wanted to humiliate him. I wanted to knock him from his perch as the man of the hour.

I had the will, and the access. All that remained now was to choose how to hurt him best. Tybalt was the God-crowned heir of Capulet; he was rich, indulged, and careless. I needed to wound him where it counted – in the eyes of his family, and preferably in the eyes of all Verona.

Ah. I spotted a gleam as something caught the light on the floor. I crossed to the corner where he'd dumped a tangle of clothing, and found the jewelled emblem pinned to his doublet – a gaudy piece, in Capulet colors, one that would feed even a well-done-by merchant family for a year. No doubt he'd underpaid for it, as well; Tybalt was more likely to terrify honest men into bargains than pay fairly. I added the prize to my purse, and then drew Tybalt's rapier from its sheath, slowly and carefully. It came free with a soft, singing ring of steel, and I turned it in the moonlight, assessing the quality. Very fine, engraved with his name and crest. A lovely weapon. A personal weapon.

He did not deserve such a beautiful thing.

I sheathed it and belted it on, opposite my own rapier. As the heir of Capulet snored, drunken and oblivious, I pulled off my black cap and bowed with perfect form, just the way I would have been honour-bound to greet him if we'd had the mischance to meet on the street. Under the

breath-moistened, black silk of my mask, I was smiling, but it felt more like a grimace.

‘Good night, sweet prince, thou poxy son of a dog,’ I whispered. Tybalt smacked his lips, mumbled drunkenly, and rolled over. In seconds, he was snoring again, loud as a grinding-wheel against a knife.

I slipped out of the door of his apartments, past his equally dozy servant, and considered my exit from the Capulet palace. The obvious was to return the way I’d entered, but I’d come in during the height of the busy afternoon, carrying a box of supplies from a provisioner’s wagon. I’d spent the day admiring the brickwork of the Capulet cellars. Going out the same way was unlikely; the kitchen door was almost certainly locked and guarded now.

Out through the narrow gardens, then. Once I was beyond the wall’s high stone barrier, I would be just another bravo on the moonlit streets, making for my bed.

I went up the stairs, taking them two at a time; my soft leather shoes made no sound on the polished marble. I’d worn gray to blend into the ever-present stone and brick of Verona; in the shadows, there was nothing better with which to disappear. Even here, inside the quiet house, it was a reasonably good disguise. I ghosted past murky squares of paintings upon the walls, and a candelabrum with two still-burning tapers (a true sign of family wealth); the tapestry at the top of the stairs was rich and very tempting to steal, but too heavy, and I had enough trophies already.

Upstairs was women’s country. Lady Capulet would have the largest and most lavish quarters, to the right – the grand palace was almost a mirror of my own family’s, in many ways. That meant the girls would have the smaller apartments to the left – the oldest, Rosaline, said to be studious and bookish, was probably well asleep by now. She’d have the far rooms, since she was only a cousin, not the lady’s own daughter. She was Tybalt’s sister, arrived in Verona only a few months before, and kept shut up hard in the palace. I’d heard a rumour she was nothing like her loathsome brother, at least; that was to her credit.

There was no servant on duty at her door, and when I tried it, I found it unlocked. A trusting lot, these Capulets, at least within their own walls. I slipped the latch and stepped quietly inside, only to find that the room

wasn't as dark as I'd hoped. There was a low-burning fire crackling on the hearth, and a candle flickering on the table. It scarcely mattered if the girl had left lights burning, as the bed curtains were pulled. She'd hear and see nothing through the thick coverings. I took reasonable care not to allow the floor to creak as I crossed it, and I was almost to the window when I realised that I had erred.

Badly.

Rosaline Capulet was not in bed. She was, instead, perched in a chair on the far side of the table, reading a slim book.

I saw her before she saw me. Candlelight dusted her skin with gold, and flickered in her large, dark eyes; her neck was swan-graceful, and her slender hands cupped the spine of the volume with care. She wore a simple lawn nightgown. I could make out the shadowed curves of her body beneath the white fabric. She had put her midnight-dark hair into a long braid for the night, and was thoughtfully twirling one end of it as she read.

No one had warned me she was beautiful.

She saw me in that next second, and shot to her bare feet in alarm. The book thumped down on the table, and I expected her to scream the house down around our ears; it was the expected response from a maiden surprised in her chamber by a masked stranger.

Instead, she took in a deep breath, then let it slowly out.

'What do you mean here? Who are you?' she asked. I was surprised by the steadiness of her voice. Her fists were clenched tightly, and I could see she trembled, but her gaze was steady and her chin firm. Not fearless, but brave. Very brave.

I put my finger to my masked lips in a request for a quieter volume. She didn't respond, so I said, softly, 'You may call me the Prince of Shadows, lady.'

That sparked interest in her expression, and a new light in her eyes. 'I've heard rumours. You exist!'

'Thus far.'

'I dismissed the tales of you as drunkard's gossip. I've heard such an array of deeds I hardly know what it is you do.'

'Thieving,' I said. 'That is what I do.'

‘Why?’ It may have sounded like a foolish question, but there was a sharp intelligence behind it, and I waited for the rest of it. ‘You’re no starving beggar. Your clothes are too fine. Your mask is silk. You’ve no need of stolen gold.’

She was not only brave, but unnaturally self-possessed. Mine was the upper hand, but I was beginning to wonder if that might only last a moment. ‘I enjoy taking from those who have too much,’ I said. ‘Those who deserve to lose for their arrogance.’

She stood very still, watching me, and then slowly inclined her head. ‘Then it follows you stole from someone in this house. Whom did you make your victim this night?’

It was a test, I realised. She had her standards, and her favorites. But I refused to lie, damn any consequences. ‘Tybalt,’ I said. ‘He’s a bully and a fool. Few deserve a come-down more, don’t you agree?’

The tension in her eased. She didn’t smile, but there was a slight lift at the corners of her mouth, as if she felt tempted. ‘Tybalt is my brother, and a dangerous man,’ Rosaline said. ‘You should take to your legs before he steals something more precious from you than you have from him.’

‘I take your meaning, and it has wisdom,’ I said, and gave her a bow cut even deeper than I’d given her brother, and a great deal more sincere. ‘You have a kind and generous spirit.’

‘Never kind, and no kin of yours, sir,’ she said. She sat down at her table again, and picked up her book, and pretended to ignore me. It was a good act, but I saw the tension crinkling the corners of her eyes. ‘Go quickly. I’ve already forgotten you.’

I gave her another bow, and opened the shutters to her window. Beyond was a balcony, overlooking the small walled garden. It was a startling lush Eden set in the heart of heavy stone. A fountain played in the centre, sprinkling gentle music over the night. No bravos strolled in sight, though I knew the Capulets employed many. Tybalt hadn’t been in his cups alone this murky evening.

I climbed over the balustrade, clung for a moment to the edge, and then dropped the long distance to a soft flowerbed below. Luridly flowering irises snapped and pulped under my feet, and the thick, sweet aroma clung

to me as I raced forward. In a heartbeat I scaled the wall, dropped into the street, shook off the dirt and manure, and began what I hoped was a calm and untroubled walk toward the Piazza delle Erbe.

I'd only just removed my mask and folded it in my purse when I heard the smack of boots on stone, and two of the city watch turned the corner ahead, dressed in the livery of the ruler of Verona, Prince Escalus. Both bore heavy arms, as they should in the dark streets, lest their wives wake to find themselves widows. The men cut a course in my direction. When the moonlight caught my face, they slowed, and bowed.

'Sir Montague,' the taller one said. 'You stand in danger here. You're in Capulet territory, and walking alone. Unwise, sir. Very unwise.'

I stumbled to a halt, as unsteady as if I'd been into Tybalt's wine cellar instead of his apartments. 'So it would be, good fellows, save I'm not alone. A Montague never walks alone.'

'Faith, he's most certainly not,' said a new voice, and I heard footsteps approaching behind me. I turned to see the familiar form of my best friend Mercutio, who doubtless had been imbibing, and heavily. He slung an arm around my neck for support. 'Benvolio Montague is never alone in a fight while I draw breath! What now, you rogues, do you need a thrashing to teach you manners?'

'Sirs,' the guard said, with just a shade less patience. 'We are the city's men. A quarrel with us is a quarrel with the Prince of Verona. Best you turn your steps to more congenial streets. Besides, the hour is very late.'

I let out a laugh that might well have been fuelled by raw wine. 'Did you hear that, Mercutio? The hour's late!' It was the first line of a popular – not very polite – drinking song, and he instantly joined in for a rousing chorus. Neither of us were musical. It provided great theatre as the two of us staggered in the direction of the Montague palace, drawing angry and sleepy curses from windows we passed.

The watchmen let us go with rueful shakes of their heads, well glad to be rid of us.

Mercutio dropped the song after we'd passed the piazza's beautiful statue, the Madonna Verona, as armed soldiers stationed in front of the overblown palazzo of the Maffei watched us pass. He didn't take his arm



from my neck, so he truly was drunk enough to need the support, but he had the sense to keep his voice down. ‘So? How fared your venture?’

I dug the jewelled emblem of the Capulets from my purse and handed it over; he whistled sharply and turned it in the moonlight, admiring the faceted shine before slipping it in his purse. ‘I have more,’ I said, and drew Tybalt’s rapier, which I tossed up in the air. Mercutio – even drunk – was a better swordsman than I, and he snatched it out of the sky with catlike grace. He examined the elegant blade with a delicate brush of his fingers.

‘Sometimes I think your skills come from a lower place than heaven,’ he said, very seriously, and patted my cheek. ‘The emblem we can sell, if we break it to gold and stones, but this ...’

‘It’s not for sale,’ I said. ‘I want it.’

‘For what?’

I smiled, feeling fierce and free and wild in ways that no one would ever believe of the quiet, solid, responsible Benvolio Montague. At night, I could be something else than what my city, my station and my family required. ‘I don’t know yet,’ I said. ‘But I promise you, it will be the talk of the city.’

The next day, Tybalt Capulet’s sword was found driven an inch deep into the heavy oak of a tavern door. Pinned to it was a ribald verse that detailed a highly entertaining story about Tybalt, a pig, and acts not generally condoned by either the church or right-thinking shepherders.

It was a good day.

It was the beginning of the end of the good days.

## QUARTO ONE

Two months later

It was hot in my grandmother’s rooms, as it always was, no matter the season. A fire blazed in the hearth, and from the heat it gave off, it might have been kindled by the breath of Satan himself. I’d shed my half cloak

before coming, but even so sweat soaked through my hose and created damp, uncomfortable patches under the heavy velvet doublet. As I waited and suffered, a chambermaid put another log on the flames, and I felt sweat run down my face like tears.

The summons to attend my grandmother had come unexpectedly, and now I only hoped to escape quickly. There was no real chance of managing it unscathed.

She gazed at me with her most typical expression of assessment and disdain. Those of any generation younger than her own would never entirely find approval, but I, at least, escaped with only her mildest contempt. Her eyes were sharp, bitter, the faded color of an ice-gray sky, and her face was the texture of weathered old oak. Family legend said she'd once been beautiful, but I couldn't believe it. She looked as wrinkled as an apple left too long in a dark corner of the cellar.

'I summoned you near an hour past,' she announced in her high, brittle voice, and coughed. A chambermaid rushed forward to wipe her lips with a soft linen handkerchief, then artfully folded it to hide the tell-tale bloodstain.

'My apologies, Grandmother,' I said, and offered her a very deep bow. 'I was with Master Silvio.' Master Silvio was our blademaster, charged with teaching the young men of Montague the skills necessary for survival in Verona. Grandmother sniffed and dismissed my excuse impatiently with a wave of her hand.

'I trust you've improved,' she said. 'There's no place for indifferent blades on the streets with Capulet's bravos always prowling for trouble.'

I smiled, just a little. 'I'm improving, I think.' Not from Master Silvio's tutelage; Mercutio had been drilling me in the finer points that Master Silvio, for all his reputation, still lacked.

'Do you think I summoned you to discuss your progress at men's silly games?' She gave me an ice-cold, stern look. 'It may interest you to hear your cousin has gone mad.'

'Which one?' Madness was always to be feared, but Grandmother's meaning had less to do with devils in one's head than her own expectations of our behavior.

She slammed the point of her cane on the floor for emphasis. ‘Who do you think, boy? The important one. Romeo. And I blame you, Benvolio.’

I stiffened my spine and tried to think what it was that I might have done to deserve that comment. I was off the one who ended escapades; I rarely started them. Such censure seemed unfair.

‘If I’ve offended, I will apologise,’ I said, and managed to hold her gaze stoutly, if not fearlessly. ‘But I know not how I might be to blame.’

‘You are the eldest of your cousins, and it is your responsibility to uphold a good moral example.’ She said it as if she had the slightest idea of what a good moral example might be. That alone made me want to laugh, but it would be suicidal at best. The stories told of Grandmother’s misspent youth were legendary. It was miraculous she’d avoided the cloister, or worse.

‘I do my best.’ I tried to imagine myself with a glowing halo over my head, like one of the gilded angels on a church wall, but from the snap of anger in her, I fell short.

‘Are you mocking me, boy?’ she asked sharply, and leant forward in her chair with a creak of old bones and older wood. Her voice dropped to a poisonous hiss. ‘Do you dare mock me?’

‘No.’ I truly meant that. No one sane offered her direct insult. No one living could claim to have survived it.

She sat back with a doubting grunt and a frown. ‘If not mockery, then that gleam in your callow face must be hate.’

Of course it was. I hated her. We all hated her, and we feared her, too. There was no one in our world more dangerous than my grandmother, the Iron Lady, La Signora di Ferro ... no Capulet, no prince, no priest or bishop or pope could hope to aspire to such heights of loathing and fear.

But I’d never be stupid enough to admit it. ‘I am ever devoted to you, Grandmother, as are we all.’ I was a good liar. It was a requirement for living in the palace.

She snorted, little misled. ‘So you should be, fool. I sometimes think I am the only Montague still possessed of any sense at all. Weak men and foolish women, that’s what we have now.’ She pierced me with that cold, alien stare again. ‘Your cousin is either mad, or sinfully stupid, and it is your

responsibility to stop him from making a mockery of his station and this house. He is the heir, and he must be kept in line. Is that plainly understood?’

This was the dangerous part of the interview, I realised; the old witch might overlook polite falsehoods, but she could smell an evasion like a vulture scenting rot. ‘With the greatest of respect, I am not sure such a thing is possible,’ I said. ‘Romeo’s young. With youth comes folly, it’s to be expected.’

That drew a bitter bark of a laugh from her. ‘Oh, yes, you’re an entire year older than Romeo. Such a lofty perch from which to pass judgment, young man. But you’ve never been foolish, I’ll give you that much. You’ve got ice in your veins. I think you get it from your foreign mother.’

I’d have given my soul for ice in my veins just now. The overpowering heat of the room was like a hug from the devil. My doublet was soaked through, and I felt sweat running through my hair like blood. Sweet Jesu, the maid was putting another log on the fire. The room stank of hot flesh and the doggy odor of overheated wool, and the old woman’s sickly perfume.

And she should not have mentioned my mother.

‘Romeo is not merely foolish; nonsense I can forgive,’ she said after the long silence. ‘There are whispers that that he writes poetry to an enemy’s wench. That is the very definition of insanity, and it threatens to make our house a laughing stock, and that is not acceptable.’ Her aged, claw-like fingers tightened on the arms of her chair ... no ordinary chair, that one, with its mismatched woods and heavy backing. She’d had it made when she was still a young Lady Montague, and legend said – I believed it – that she’d caused it to be built from the broken doors of her enemies’ palaces. Their villas lay empty now, inhabited only by shadows and shades, and she had made a trophy of their once-strong barricades on which to rest her backside.

We feared Grandmother for a reason.

Romeo, writing poetry. Knowing him, I could believe it, though he hadn’t told me he’d done something so foolhardy. ‘If such is true, he’s only fevered with infatuation. It will soon pass.’

‘Pass, will it?’ She shivered, snapped her fingers, and a maid rushed forward to place a fur-lined cloak over her knees as the fire sizzled on,

melting me in misery. ‘And how if I told you that he was writing his scribbles to a Capulet?’

I couldn’t keep the surprise from my face. ‘What? Which?’

‘Rosaline, I hear. The plain one.’ She dismissed Rosaline with an impatient flick of her fingers. I did not. I’d met the girl, that dark-drowned night months back. She was someone to be taken quite seriously. ‘If he’s fevered with love, his fever may well infect and sicken this entire house. I charge you to deliver him from this – you, and the Ordelaffi boy, Mercutio. He’s sensible enough, and ever eager for a fight should it come to blades. One thing is certain, if there have been verses exchanged, you must retrieve them. It won’t do to have the heir of Montague made into a street joke.’ She speared me with a significant, evil look. ‘I know of your night-time ventures, boy, and I have allowed it because it suited me. Now you may run on my leash for a time. Get his letters from the girl. Quietly.’

Somehow, I found I was not surprised Grandmother knew of my secret career as the Prince of Shadows. ‘And if I don’t wish to be leashed?’

In the silence, I listened to logs sizzle and pop. The servants had all gone still and silent, their gazes fixed on me with avid interest. No one stood up to the old witch. I had no idea what had prompted me to, save the reference to my mother.

‘Then, Benvolio Montague,’ she said quietly, ‘you may yet come to the attention of Prince Escalus’ men. I hear they urgently seek a certain sneak-thief.’

‘You wouldn’t. It would humiliate our house, and my uncle.’

She shrugged. ‘Perhaps your uncle could use bringing to heel as well. But only do this for me, boy, and I’ll keep your secret. Your cousin, protected; your own reputation unsullied . . . surely you can stretch yourself to the task.’

‘Surely,’ I said. She had me in a trap, and short of gnawing off my own limb I couldn’t hope for escape.

She took that as agreement, thankfully. ‘And remember, from now on, you will be responsible for Romeo and any lapses in judgment. It’s been agreed.’

I did not want to be made responsible for Romeo’s misadventures. This

week it was forbidden love for a cousin of our greatest enemies. The next fortnight might bring something wholly new and even more added. I had no wish to be hovering at his shoulder like Grandmother's notion of a guardian angel . . . but from the implacable look in her eyes, I had very little choice. Again.

I hoped that somewhere in the stifling shadows of this room lurked powerful angels of my very own, because disappointing La Signora di Ferro was a very dangerous game, even for a Montague of the blood. I was not the most favoured child of the house – Romeo held that honour, as principal heir. I was the older one, the sane one, the stable one. The one born of a dubious foreign mother.

The one to whom it fell to clear up Montague's messes. Small wonder I took out my frustrations at night, in the dark, by stealing from those I hated. What other outlet could I have?