

The year was 1395. During this period of linear time and space, Verona citizens were unprepared for a deadly threat to begin with two forbidden lovers from two feuding families: a strapping young man called Romeo, and the woman of any man's wildest dreams named Juliet. A trusted friend, Friar Lawrence, conducted a secret marriage for Romeo and Juliet.

Later, with Romeo exiled from Verona for seeking revenge on Tybalt for killing his best friend Mercutio, everything changed. A lifelong feud brewing between the Montagues and Capulets brought a new threat nigh on the horizon.

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### **Mantua — Italy**

Romeo stood out front of Mantua's Apothecary, wiping salty wet tears from his face. A rowdy crowd of townsfolk chattered in high spirits behind him at the marketplace, laughing amongst one another in the teeming streets, adding to his sorrow. It was as if their blatant happiness might cut thick slashes upon his wrists. Their pleasure only amplified his abject misery. He wished the skies would turn to black, and a lightning bolt with his miserable name on it came to smite him where he stood frozen on the spot in the cobbled street, his mind cornered again daydreaming of his beloved, Juliet; eons away.

A brown wren with an inflated abdomen hid in a tall birch tree, taking the opportunity to find humour in Romeo's apathy. Its missile-fire splodge of white poop barrelled toward the ground, splattering on his right arm. The wren tweeted in glee, hopping side to side along the branch. Romeo cursed, spittle flying from his mouth in rage. He cursed the heavens, wiping his arm against the bark of the tree. "Damn you, flying beast!" The bird flew from the branch in a victory flap, taunting Romeo by dipping and diving through the air to find its next unwilling target. He raised his wrist, bark from the tree clinging to his curly arm hair.

*Could my life get any worse?*

Romeo could not win today; would never win again. He found out a few hours ago from Balthasar that Juliet died, laid to rest in a tomb within one of their family towers. His

lover, whom he thought he would spend the rest of his life with, even if it meant them eloping from their feuding families, had been cut short.

His heart continued to break. He placed a hand across the fabric of his white cotton shirt, seeing if he still possessed a working heartbeat. It was beating rapidly, every beat wanting to crush his chest from the inside out, like the devil himself were wringing his heart with a tightly clenched hand.

Romeo had never experienced loss quite so raw and pure. His life was complete when he first lay eyes upon Juliet at the Capulets' party; a predestined encounter; an apparent lifetime ago. He returned to a bothersome state of being incomplete without Juliet's sweet embrace. He loved and lost in the blink of an eye.

There was one plan that made sense to the young, heartbroken man. He could not go on living, so with a newfound spring in his step soon to fade just sparing a thought for Juliet, he opened the door of the Apothecary to purchase the poison he would take to end his life inside Juliet's tomb.

Romeo wanted to die beside his lover. He damned well deserved to die with his short-lived wife, going to a special place built for them beyond the earthly curtain, where they could be together with no consequences, no judgements, and no harsh outside commentaries trying to tear them apart forever over an ancient quarrel that had nothing to do with them.

Why did he ponder so, when his beloved walked this earthly realm no longer? There would be no happy ending, no country-styled home far away from cities, with youngsters running wild and free, dirtying up clothes, lighting up their devoid lives with love and one day, grandchildren; desires unfulfilled.

Romeo had been standing in a daze at the counter of the Apothecary for a length of time he couldn't predict. Mr. Falstaff, the owner, was staring at Romeo with a watchful eye.

Mr Falstaff broke the lingering silence. "You alright there young Romeo? You look pale, like you've just seen a ghost?" He stroked his white moustache, studying Romeo, as if Romeo might rob the store in an instant. Mr. Falstaff was simply a poor salesman, and in the day and age, one could never be too careful whom to trust.

Romeo cast his eyes back to the old shopkeeper, finding his attention drifting to thoughts of Juliet, an impossible affliction that could only result in his untimely death; he couldn't live like this and needed to die. His physical vessel needed to breathe the breath of life until he was reunited in the afterlife with Juliet. If Mr. Falstaff produced a sharp dagger before him in this very moment, offering to end Romeo with it, he would've helped the fellow get the job over and done with. Hell, maybe he should've tried to rob the store if it meant Mr. Falstaff might murder him in self-defence over his worthless wares. Romeo's plan B was too extreme compared to plan A—the poison would be quick, or he secretly hoped, filled with as much pain as could be concocted in glass vials so small.

“I've lost the only woman I've ever loved, and I can't possibly bear to go on in this life. I must die alongside her. I'd like to buy the strongest poison from your wares, if you are willing to help a poor, heartbroken man such as I say my goodbyes to this world to join my dearly departed, treasured wife.”

“Why, but Romeo? Are you terribly sure, sir?” Mr Falstaff's eyes expanded from Romeo's news, the dark irises twinkling in the dimly lit shop. Romeo wondered if the man's eyes might pop out of his skull to fall on the counter in front of him. When Romeo focused his gaze, he almost swore Mr. Falstaff's eyes had no colour, hollow, devilish in the way he observed, hands held loosely behind his back. His sheepskin cloak stunk like unwashed stockings.

Romeo nodded. “It's the only way.” He tore his eyes from the gaping worm holes of Mr. Falstaff's black eyes, hoping his desperate plea would be met with no further questions. The guilt ate him alive, but the shopkeeper seemed to be sympathising with Romeo, helping his cause dearly. Besides, this was Romeo's life, and he should get to do with it what he willed, including poisoning himself to death if he so chose. Still, something about Mr. Falstaff gave Romeo the willies down his spine, the small blonde hairs on the back of his neck standing to attention like soldiers prepped for war.

The old man shuffled to a back room in the store, before returning promptly with a vial of thick, dark liquid. Romeo took a deep breath. Soon, he would have the poison and be free of this soul-sucking, musty shop.

“This amount should do it, Romeo.” Mr. Falstaff spoke behind pursed lips, his motives unknown, yet Romeo didn’t have much choice; his heart had decided. This would be his last day on Earth. It was a silent promise he had made to Juliet, in honour of their fleeting love.

“What do I owe thou?” Romeo reached for his coin purse strapped across his shoulder.

“No need Romeo, no need.” Mr. Falstaff waved his hands slightly below his waist to repel Romeo’s payment. “It’s on the house. I wouldn’t see you waste your last coins on a poison strong enough to kill a thousand men.”

The old man winked, his crow’s feet sharpening along his outer right eye.

Romeo gulped.

This was what he was meant to do for the sake of love.

Romeo would return to Verona on his silver horse, Jax. There he would hide, waiting for the crescent moon to cast his shadowy frame across the streets, entering the tower where his beloved wife was laid to rest. Balthasar had given Romeo directions, and if he stayed silent to avoid capture, his final wish to die with her would be granted.

“Thank you for your generosity, Mr. Falstaff. I must take my leave. I have places to be, poison to take. You know how it is for grieving, heartbroken men?”

Romeo smiled in a weak attempt at showing gratitude, but the sorrow had returned. He had long forgotten about Mr. Falstaff’s hollow eyes.

“Rest in peace, Romeo.”

“Goodbye, Mr. Falstaff.”

Romeo opened the door. The bell above jingled as the door slammed him from behind due to his moping dawdle.

It wouldn’t be long now—Romeo would find Juliet to fulfil his life’s purpose.

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### Verona—Italy

Romeo crossed the empty backstreets in the dead of night, the cobblestones damp beneath his dirty russet boots, blocked from the wind sweeping across the main city streets from the distant hills. His hooded cloak swept along behind him. He sighed upon reaching the gloomy tower, looming like a giant monolith in front of him. He tapped the pocket of his cloak. The vial was still there, waiting for him. He removed his hood, checking twice over his shoulder to ensure he had not been followed. Romeo moved through the courtyard toward the tower's arched wooden door.

Romeo grabbed the iron latch and turned it, uttering a brief prayer for a miracle before observing the door had been left unlocked, opening with a creak which could wake a heavily snoring man. He slowed his movements, afraid to alert any passers-by.

It would be over soon.

In the circular chamber, he grabbed a burning torch from its holster on the cracked stone wall. He took the spiralling steps two at a time, watching his shadows creep and dance along the walls, likening him to a grotesque monster; maybe poisoning himself made him a monster, but it was in the name of love.

He puffed, out of breath, walking through an archway on the top floor to enter the tomb where he spotted Juliet, motionless on a stone tablet. Romeo approached, tears swelling in his eyes, blurring his surrounds. He knelt beside her, placing a hand on her chest before he reached down and kissed her forehead. He snuffed the torch, setting it aside.

"I'm coming Juliet, hold on—I love you."

Romeo removed the vial. He could bear it no longer, removing the cap and swigging the thick liquid in one fell swoop. His throat burned like wildfire. He wrapped his icy hands around his neck like it would cool the burning sensation. The scorch strangled him with no mercy, lighting a bonfire inside his chest, shrivelling his broken heart.

Romeo dropped dead, flat on his face.

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The liquid had only been designed to place Juliet into a deep sleep.

When her eyes opened and adjusted to the room, she nearly died of shock. Juliet leapt off the tablet, kneeling to sweep Romeo into her shaky arms.

“Why Romeo?”

A heavy flow of tears drizzled down her flushed cheeks. She looked up, spotting Friar Lawrence standing in the archway. Friar Lawrence’s eyes widened, watching the scene unfold without a word of support.

There was movement in Juliet’s arms. She looked down to spot Romeo’s eyes open, watching her. He moved his bleeding mouth ajar, groaning before reaching for her neck. His teeth clamped on Juliet’s flesh as she screamed for her life. Romeo fed atop her, blood flowing free before rising to shuffle after his next victim, Friar Lawrence.

Juliet rose from the dead reanimated, stumbling behind Romeo with an affliction for bodily parts.

It was the eve forever remembered as, ‘The Apocalypse of Romeo and Juliet’.

The deadly virus spread, infecting the major population of Verona, reminding its citizens of Romeo and Juliet’s lost legacy of love; the beginning of an apocalyptic age.

A new, frightened world emerged with the rising sun.

