

Extract taken from 'A Shakespeare Story: Romeo and Juliet'

As he knelt in front of the altar, Friar Lawrence heard the sound of the chapel door opening, and footsteps racing up the aisle. He stood, turned and saw Juliet, who flung herself sobbing at his feet. "Help me, Friar Lawrence!" she begged. "My father wants me to marry Count Paris, but I'd rather die than forsake Romeo." "Do not despair my child," Friar Lawrence urged. "Surely you can reason with your father?"

"I could not bring myself to tell him about Romeo," Juliet sobbed. "I pleaded Tybalt's death had made me too full of grief to think of marriage. But father would not listen and the wedding is to take place tomorrow."

Friar Lawrence looked troubled. "There may be a way for you and Romeo to be together, my child, but it is dangerous," he said. Friar Lawrence took a tiny bottle of blue liquid from the pouch of his belt. "Drink this tonight," he said, "and you will fall into a sleep as deep as death. Your parents will believe that you are dead and will put your body into the tomb – but in two days you will wake, alive and well."

"And Romeo?" said Juliet.

"I will send him a message explaining everything," said Friar Lawrence. "After you wake, you can go to Mantua in secret."

And so, on the morning of Juliet's wedding to Paris, the screams of her nurse woke the whole Capulet house. When the news of Juliet's death reached Benvolio, he rode straight to Mantua to Romeo. One of the travellers he passed on the way was a monk, who recognised him. "Lord Benvolio!" he called out as Benvolio approached. "I have a letter for your cousin Romeo from Friar Lawrence!"

"Out of my way!" Benvolio shouted back. "I have no time to stop!"

The monk watched as Benvolio galloped by on the road to Mantua. At that speed, the monk judged, Benvolio would be in the city before evening.

When Benvolio told Romeo that Juliet was dead, Romeo's heart broke and for hours he lay sobbing on his bed, while outside turned to night. During that time, Benvolio stayed at Romeo's side, but he had no idea how to comfort his grief-stricken friend. It was almost midnight before Romeo grew calm enough to speak. He sat up and wiped away his tears with the back of his hand. "I must go to her," he said.

"But the prince has banished you!" Benvolio reminded him. "If you are seen on the streets of Verona, it will mean your death."

"I am not afraid of death," said Romeo. "Without Juliet, my life means nothing. Go wake the grooms, and tell them to saddle my horse."

When Benvolio had left him alone, Romeo searched through the wooden chest at the foot of his bed until he found a green glass bottle that contained a clear liquid. "I shall drink this poison, and die at Juliet's side!" he vowed. Romeo left Mantua at daybreak, refusing to let Benvolio accompany him. Once out of the city, he travelled along winding country tracks so that he could approach Verona without being seen. It was night when he arrived and with the hood on his cloak drawn up to hide his face, he slipped in unrecognised through the city walls at the main gate.

He went straight to the Capulet tomb, and it was almost as if someone had expected him, for the door was unlocked, and the interior was lit by a burning torch. Romeo looked around, saw Tybalt's body, pale as candle wax – then Juliet, laid out on a marble slab, her death shroud as white as a bridal gown. With a cry,

Romeo rushed to her side and covered her face with kisses and tears. "I cannot live without you," he whispered. "I want your beauty to be the last thing my eyes see. We could not be together in life, my sweet love, but in death, nothing shall part us!" Romeo drew the cork from the poison bottle and raised it to his lips. He felt the vile liquid sting his throat. Then darkness swallowed him.

For a time, there was no sound except the spluttering of the torch; then Juliet began to breathe. She moaned, opened her eyes, and saw Romeo dead at her side with the empty poison bottle in his hand. At first she thought she was dreaming, but when she reached out to touch Romeo's face, and smelled the bitter scent of the poison, she knew that the nightmare was real, and that Friar Lawrence's plan had gone terribly wrong. She cradled Romeo in her arms and rocked him, weeping unto his hair. "If you had only waited a little longer!" Juliet whispered, and she kissed Romeo again and again, desperately hoping there was enough poison on his lips that she too might die. Then she saw the torchlight gleam on the dagger at Romeo's belt. She drew the weapon and pressed its point to her heart, "Now dagger, take me to my love!" she said, and pushed with all her strength.

Friar Lawrence found the lovers a few hours later. They were huddled together like sleeping children.

When Romeo and Juliet died, the hatred between the Montagues and Capulets died with them. United by grief, the two families agreed that Romeo and Juliet should be buried together. They paid for a statue over the grave, and on the base of the statue these words were carved:

*There never was a story of more woe
Than this of Juliet and Romeo.*