

New York Times bestselling author of *Sacré Bleu* and *Fool*

CHRISTOPHER
MOORE



THE
SERPENT
OF
VENICE

"Shakespeare and Poe might be rolling in their graves, but they're rolling with laughter. Moore is one of the cleverest, naughtiest writers alive."
—CARL HIAASEN, *New York Times* bestselling author of *Bad Monkey*

The Serpent of Venice

CHRISTOPHER MOORE



WILLIAM MORROW

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THE CAST

Chorus—a narrator

Antonio—a Venetian merchant

Brabantio—a senator of Rome, father of Desdemona and Portia

Iago—a soldier

Rodrigo—a gentleman soldier, friend of Iago

Pocket—a fool

Portia—a lady, younger daughter of Brabantio, sister to Desdemona

Nerissa—maid to Portia

Desdemona—a lady, elder daughter of Brabantio, sister to Portia

Emilia—wife of Iago, maid to Desdemona

Othello—a Moor, commanding general of the Venetian military

Shylock—a Jew, Venetian moneylender, father of Jessica

Jessica—Shylock's daughter

Bassanio—friend of Antonio, suitor to Portia

Lorenzo—friend of Antonio, suitor to Jessica

Gratiano—young friend of Antonio, a merchant

Salanio—young friend of Antonio, a merchant

Salarino—also a young friend of Antonio, interchangeable with Salanio, may have been born of typo

Drool—a fool's apprentice

Jeff—a monkey

Cordelia—a ghost. There's always a bloody ghost.

THE STAGE

The stage is a mythical late-thirteenth-century Italy, where independent city-states trade and war with one another. Venice has been at war with Genoa, off and on, for fifty years, over control of the shipping routes to the Orient and the Holy Land.

Venice has been an independent republic for five hundred years, governed by an elected senate of 480 men, who in turn elect a doge, who, advised by a high council of six senators, oversees the senate, the military, and civil appointments. Senators come mostly from Venice's powerful merchant class, and until recently could be elected, by neighborhood, from any walk of life. But the system that has made Venice the richest and most powerful maritime nation in the world has changed. Recently, privileged senators, interested in passing the legacy of power and wealth to their families, voted to make their elected positions inheritable.

Strangely, although most of the characters are Venetian, everybody speaks English, and with a slight English accent.

Unless otherwise described, assume conditions to be humid.

MAP OF VENICE



MAP OF ITALY



ACT I

Fortunato's Fate

Hell and Night must bring this monstrous birth to light.

—Iago, *Othello*, Act I, Scene 3

INVOCATION

*Rise, Muse!
Darkwater sprite,
Bring stirring play
To vision's light.*

*Rise, Muse!
On fin and tail
With fang and claw
Rend invention's veil.*

*Come, Muse!
'Neath harbored ship,
Under night fisher's torch,
And sleeping sailors slip.*

*To Venice, Muse!
Radiant venom convey,
Charge scribe's driven quill
To story assay.*

*Of betrayal, grief and war,
Provoke, Muse, your howl
Of love's laughter lost and
Heinous Fuckery, most foul . . .*

The Trap

They waited at the dock, the three Venetians, for the fool to arrive.

“An hour after sunset, I told him,” said the senator, a bent-backed graybeard in a rich brocade robe befitting his office. “I sent a gondola myself to fetch him.”

“Aye, he’ll be here,” said the soldier, a broad-shouldered, fit brute of forty, in leather and rough linen, full sword and fighting dagger at his belt, black bearded with a scar through his right brow that made him look ever questioning or suspicious. “He thinks himself a connoisseur, and can’t resist the temptation of your wine cellar. And when it is done, we shall have more than Carnival to celebrate.”

“And yet, I feel sad,” said the merchant. A soft-handed, fair-skinned gent who wore a fine, floppy velvet hat, and a gold signet ring the size of a small mouse, with which he sealed agreements. “I know not why.”

They could hear the distant sounds of pipes, drums, and horns from across the lagoon in Venice. Torches bounced on the shoreline near Piazza San Marco. Behind them, the senator’s estate, Villa Belmont, stood dark but for a storm lantern in an upper window, a light by which a gondolier might steer to the private island. Out on the water, fishermen had lit torches, which bobbed like dim, drunk stars against the inky water. Even during Carnival, the city must eat.

The senator put his hand on the merchant’s shoulder. “We perform service to God and state, a relief to conscience and heart, a cleansing that opens a pathway to our designs. Think of the bounteous fortune that will find you, once the rat is removed from the granary.”

“But I quite like his monkey,” said the merchant.

The soldier grinned and scratched his beard to conceal his amusement. “You’ve seen to it that he comes alone?”

“It was a condition of his invitation,” said the senator. “I told him out of good Christian charity and his servants were to be dismissed to attend Carnival, as I assured him I had done with my own.”

“Shrewdly figured,” said the soldier, looking back to the vast, unlit villa. “He’ll think nothing out of order then when he sees no attendants.”

“But monkeys can be terribly hard to catch,” said the merchant.

“Would you forget about the monkey,” growled the soldier.

“I told him that my daughter is terrified of monkeys, could not be in the same room with one.”

“But she isn’t here,” said the merchant.

“The fool doesn’t know that,” said the soldier. “Our brave Montessor will cast his young

daughter as bait, even after having the eldest stolen from the hook by a blackfish.”

“The senator’s loss cuts deep enough without your barbs,” said the merchant. “Do we not pursue the same purpose? Your wit is too mean to be clever, merely crude and cruel.”

“But, sweet Antonio,” said the soldier. “I am at once clever, crude, *and* cruel—all assets to your endeavor. Or would you rather partner with the kindly edge of a more courtly sword?” He laid his hand on the hilt of his sword.

The merchant looked out over the water.

“I thought not,” said the soldier.

“Put on friendly faces, you two.” The senator stepped between them and squinted into the night. “The fool’s boat approaches. There!”

Amid the fishing boats a bright lantern drifted, and slowly broke rank as the gondola moved toward them. In a moment it was gliding into the dock, the gondolier so precise in his handling of the oar that the black boat stopped with its rails only a handsbreadth from the dock. A louvered hatch clacked open and out of the cabin stepped a wiry little man dressed in the black-and-silver motley and mask of a harlequin. By his size, one might have thought him a boy, but the oversize codpiece and the shadow of a beard on his cheek betrayed his years.

“One lantern?” said the harlequin, hopping up onto the dock. “You couldn’t have spared an extra torch or two, Brabantio? It’s dark as night’s own nutsack out here.” He breezed by the soldier and the merchant. “Toadies,” he said, nodding to them. Then he was on his way up the path to the villa, pumping a puppet-headed jester’s scepter as he went. The senator tottered along behind him, holding the lantern high to light their way.

“It’s an auspicious night, Fortunato,” said the senator. “And I sent the servants away before nightfall so—”

“Call me Pocket,” said the fool. “Only the doge calls me Fortunato. Wonder that’s not his nickname for everyone, bloody bung-fingered as he is at cards.”

At the dock, the soldier again laid hand on sword hilt, saying, “By the saints, I would run my blade up through his liver right now, and lift him on it just to watch that arrogant grin wither as he twitches. Oh how I do hate the fool.”

The merchant smiled and talked through his teeth as he pressed the soldier’s sword hand down, throwing a nod toward the gondolier, who was standing on his boat, waiting. “As do I, in the pantomime we perform for Carnival, he is our jibing clown. Ha! The Punchinello in our little puppet show, all in good fun, am I right?”

The soldier looked to the boatman and forced a grin. “Quite right. All in good cheer. I play my part too well. One moment, signor. I will have your instructions.” He turned and called up the path. “Montessor! The gondolier?”

“Pay him and tell him to go, be merry, and return at midnight.”

“You heard him,” said the soldier. “Go celebrate, but not so much that you cannot steer. I would sleep in my own bed this night. Pay him, Antonio.” The soldier turned and headed up the path.

“Me? Why is it always me?” He dug into his purse. “Very well, then.” The merchant tossed a coin to the gondolier, who snatched it out of the air and bowed his head in thanks. “Midnight then.”

“Midnight, signor,” said the gondolier, who twisted his oar, sending the gondola sliding away from

the dock silent and smooth as a knife through the night.

Outside the grand entrance of the palazzo the fool paused. “What’s that above your door, Montessor?” There was a coat of arms inlaid in the marble, ensconced in shadow. The senator held up his lantern, illuminating the crest, showing the relief of a man’s foot in gold, trampling a jade serpent even as its fangs pierced the heel.

“My family crest,” said the senator.

“Reckon they were all out of proper dragons and lions down at the crest shop so you had to settle for this toss, eh?”

“Think they’d have thrown in a *fleur-de-lis*,” said the fool’s puppet stick, in a voice just a notch above the fool’s own. “*Montessor*’s fucking French, innit?”

The senator whirled around to face the puppet. “*Montessor* is a title bestowed upon me by the doge. It means ‘my treasure’ and notes that he holds me highest in regard of the six senators of the high council. This is the crest of the family Brabantio, one our family has worn with pride for four hundred years. Do note the motto, fool, ‘*Nemo me impune lacessit.*’ ” He bounced the lantern with each syllable as he read through gritted teeth. “It means, ‘No one attacks me with impunity.’ ”

“Well, that’s not fucking French,” said the puppet, turning to look at the fool.

“No,” said the fool. “The puppet Jones is quite fluent in fucking French,” he explained to the senator.

“But *Montessor* is French, right?”

“Froggy as a summer day on the Seine,” said the fool.

“Thought so,” said the puppet.

“Stop talking to that puppet!” barked the senator.

“Well, you were just shouting at him,” said the fool.

“And now I’m shouting at you! *You* are working the puppet’s mouth and giving it voice.”

“No!” said the puppet, his wooden jaw agape, looking to the fool, then to the senator, then back to the fool. “This bloody toss-bobbin is running things?”

The fool nodded; the bells on his hat jingled earnestly.

The puppet turned to the senator. “Well, if you’re going to be a bastard about it, your bloody motto is nicked.”

“What?” said the senator.

“Plagiarized,” said the fool, still nodding solemnly, the bringer of sad news.

The merchant and the soldier had caught up to them and could see that their host was incensed, so they stood at the bottom of the steps, watching. The soldier’s hand fell to the hilt of his sword.

“It’s the Scottish motto, innit?” said the puppet. “Bloody Order of the Fistle.”

“It’s true,” said the fool. “Although it’s *Thistle*, not *Fistle*, Jones, you Cockney berk.”

“What I said,” said the puppet Jones. “Piss off.”

The fool glared at the puppet, then turned back to the senator. “Same motto is inscribed over the entrance to Edinburgh Castle.”

“You must be remembering it wrong. It *is* in Latin.”

“Indeed,” said the fool. “And I am raised by nuns in the bosom of the church. Could speak and write Latin and Greek before I could see over the table. No, *Montessor*, your motto couldn’t be more

Scottish if it was painted blue and smelled of burning peat and your ginger sister.”

“Stolen,” said the puppet. “Pilfered. Swiped. Filched, as it fucking were. A motto most used, defiled, and besmirched.”

“Besmirched?” said the fool. “Really?”

The puppet nodded furiously on the end of his stick. The fool shrugged to the senator. “A right shite crest and a motto most besmirched, Montessor. Let’s hope this amontillado you’ve promised can comfort us in our disappointment.”

The merchant stepped up then and put his hand on the fool’s shoulder. “Then let’s waste no more time out here in the mist. To the senator’s cellar and his cask of exquisite amontillado.”

“Yes,” said the senator. He stepped through the doorway into a grand foyer, took tapers from a credenza, lit them from his lantern, and handed one to each of his guests. “Mind your step,” said the senator. “We’ll be going down ancient stairs to the very lowest levels of the palazzo. Some ceiling will be quite low, so, Antonio, Iago, watch your heads.”

“Did he just besmirch our height?” asked the puppet.

“Can’t say,” said the fool. “I’m not entirely sure I know what *besmirched* means. I’ve just been going along with you because I thought you knew what you were talking about.”

“Quiet, flea,” growled the soldier.

“That there’s a besmirchin’, “ said the puppet.

“Oh, well, yes then,” said the fool. He raised his taper high, illuminating a thick coat of mold on the low ceiling. “So, Montessor, is the lovely Portia waiting down here in the dark?”

“I’m afraid my youngest daughter will not be joining us. She’s gone to Florence to buy shoes.”

They entered a much wider vault now, with casks set into the walls on one side, racks of dusty bottles on the other; a long oak table and high-backed chairs ran down the middle. The senator lit lanterns around the chamber until the entire room was bathed in a warm glow that belied the dampness that permeated the cellar.

“Just as well,” said the fool. “She’d just be whingeing about the dark and the damp and how Iago reeks of squid and we’d never get any proper drinking done.”

“What?” said the soldier.

The fool leaned into Antonio and bounced his eyebrows so they showed above his black mask. “Don’t get me wrong, Portia’s a luscious little fuck-bubble to be sure, but prickly as a gilded hedgehog when she doesn’t get her way.”

The senator looked up with murderous fire in his eyes, then quickly looked down and shuddered. Almost, it seemed, with pleasure.

“I do not reek of squid,” said the soldier, as if overcome by a rare moment of self-consciousness. He sniffed at the shoulder of his cape, and finding no squidish aroma, returned his attention to the senator.

“If you’d be so kind as to decant the amontillado, Iago,” said the senator, “we can be about getting the opinion of this distinguished connoisseur.”

“I never said I was a connoisseur, Montessor. I just said I’d had it before and it was the mutt’s nuts.”

“The dog’s bollocks,” said the puppet, clarifying.

“When you were king of Spain, correct?” said the merchant, with a grin and a sarcastic roll of the tongue.

eyes toward the senator.

“I’ve had various titles,” said Fortunato. “Only *fool* seems constant.”

The soldier cradled the heavy cask under his arm as if he was strangling a bullnecked enemy and filled a delicate Murano glass pitcher with the amber liquid.

The senator said: “The wine dealer has five more casks coming from Spain. If you pronounce genuine, I’ll buy the others and have one sent round to you in thanks.”

“Let’s have a taste, then,” said the fool. “Although, without it’s poured by a properly wanton, olive-skinned serving wench, you can’t really call it authentic, but I suppose Iago will have to suffice.”

“Won’t be the first time he’s filled that role, I’ll wager,” said the puppet Jones. “Lonely nights in the field, and whatnot.”

The soldier grinned, set the cask on the table, and with a nod from the senator poured the sherry into four heavy glass tumblers with pewter bases cast in the shape of winged lions.

“To the republic,” said the senator, raising his glass.

“To the Assumption,” said the merchant. “To Carnival!”

“To Venice,” said the soldier.

“To the delicious Desdemona,” said the fool.

And the merchant nearly choked as he looked to the senator, who calmly drank, then lowered his glass to the table, never looking from the fool.

“Well?”

The fool swished the liquid in his cheeks, rolled his eyes at the ceiling in consideration, then swallowed as if enduring an especially noxious medicine. He shuddered and looked over the rim of his glass at the senator. “I’m not sure,” he said.

“Well, sit, try a bit more,” said the merchant. “Sometimes the first drink only clears the dust of the day off a man’s palate.”

The fool sat, as did the others. They all drank again. The glasses clunked down. The three looked at the fool.

“Well?” asked Iago.

“Montessor, you’ve been had,” said the fool. “This is not *amontillado*.”

“It’s not?” said the senator.

“Tastes perfect to me,” said the merchant.

“No, it’s not *amontillado*,” said the fool. “And I can see from your face that you are neither surprised nor disappointed. So while we quaff this imposter—which tastes a bit of pitch, if you ask me—shall we turn to your darker purpose? The real reason we are all here.” The fool drained his glass, leaned on the table, and rolled his eyes coyly at the senator in the manner of a flirting teenage girl.

“Shall we?”

The soldier and the merchant looked to the senator, who smiled.

“Our darker purpose?” asked the senator.

“Tastes of pitch?” asked the merchant.

“Not to me,” said the soldier, now looking at his glass.

“Do you think me a fool?” said the fool. “Don’t answer that. I mean, do you think me foolish? A well-formed question as well.” He looked at his hand and seemed surprised to find it at the end of his

wrist, then looked back to the senator. "You brought me here to convince me to rally the doge for you to back another holy war."

"No," said the senator.

"No? You don't want a bloody war?"

"Well, yes," said the soldier. "But that's not why we've brought you here."

"Then you wish me to entreat my friend Othello to back you in a Crusade, from which you all may profit. I knew it when I got the invitation."

"Hadn't thought about it," said the senator. "More sherry?"

The fool adjusted his hat, and when the bells jingled he followed one around with his eyes and nearly went over backward in his chair.

Antonio, the merchant, steadied the fool, and patted his back to reassure him.

The fool pulled away, and regarded the merchant, looking him not just in the eye, but around the eyes, as if they were windows to a dark house and he was looking for someone hiding inside.

"Then you don't want me to use my influence in France and England to back a war?"

The merchant shook his head and smiled.

"Oh balls, it's simple revenge then?"

Antonio and Iago nodded.

The fool regarded the senator, and seemed to have difficulty focusing on the graybeard. "Everyone knows I'm here. Many saw me board the gondola to come here."

"And they will see a fool return," said the senator.

"I am a favorite of the doge," slurred the fool. "He adores me."

"That is the problem," said the senator.

In a single motion the fool leapt from his chair to the middle of the table, reached into the small of his back, and came up with a wickedly pointed throwing dagger, which caught his eye as it flashed in his hand before him. He wobbled and shook his head as if to clear his vision.

"Poison?" he said, somewhat wistfully. "Oh, fuckstockings, I am slain—"

His eyes rolled back in his head, his knees buckled, and he fell face-forward on the table with a thump and a rattle of his blade across the floor.

The three looked from the prostrate Fortunato to each other.

The soldier felt the fool's neck for a pulse. "He's alive, but I can remedy that." He reached for his dagger.

"No," said the senator. "Help me get him out of his clothes and to a deeper section of the cell, then take your leave. You last saw him alive, and you can swear on your soul that is all you know."

Antonio the merchant sighed. "It's sad we must kill the little fool, who, while wildly annoying, does seem to bring mirth and merriment to those around him. Yet I suppose if there is a ducat to be made, it must be made. If a profit blossoms, so must a merchant pluck it."

"Duty to God, profit, and the republic!" said the senator.

"Many a fool has found his end trying to resist the wind of war," said Iago. "So shall this one."

The Dark

What are you doing?" I asked.

"I'm walling you up in the dungeon," said the senator, who crouched in the arched doorway to the chamber in which I was chained to the wall.

"No you're not," said I.

Indeed, it appeared that he was walling me up, but I wasn't going to concede that simply because I was chained, naked, and water was rising about my feet. Cautious, I was, not to instill a sense of confidence in my enemy.

"I am," said he. "Brick by brick. The first masonry I've done since I was a lad, but it comes back to me. I was ten, I think, when I helped the mason who was building my father's house. Not this one, of course. This house has been in the family for centuries. And I think I was less help than in his way, but alas, I learned."

"Well, you couldn't possibly have been more annoying than you are now, so do get on with it."

The senator stabbed his trowel into a bucket of mortar with such enthusiasm that he might have been spearing my liver. Then he held his lamp through the doorway into my little chamber, which he had already bricked up to just above his knees. By the lamplight I saw I was in a passageway barely two yards wide, that sloped downward into the dark water, which was now washing about my ankles. There was a high-tide line on the wall, about the level of my chest.

"You know you're going to die here, Fortunato?"

"Pocket," I corrected. "You're mad, Brabantio. Deluded, paranoid, and irritatingly grandiose."

"You'll die. Alone. In the dark." He tamped down a brick with the butt of his trowel.

"Senile, probably. It comes early to the inbred or the syphilitic."

"The crabs won't even wait for you to stop moving before they begin to clean your bones."

"Ha!" said I.

"What do you mean, *Ha?*" said Brabantio.

"You've played right into my hands!"

I shrugged, as best I could, at the owl-horking obviousness of his folly. (Shrugging comprised my entire repertoire of gesture, as my hands were chained through a heavy ring in the wall above my head. I did not hang, but neither could I sit. If I pulled the chain to its exact balance point, I suppose I could have flapped my hands at the end of their shackles, but I had no story to go with the flapping.)

The senator chuckled and resumed troweling mortar for the next row of bricks. "We're below the

level of the lagoon. I could torture you to death and no one would hear you scream. But I prefer to go to my bed and fall into slumber wrapped in the sweet dream of your suffering in the dark, dying slowly.”

“Ha! See there. I thought myself dead when I drank your poison, so for my money, I’m ahead of the game.”

“You weren’t poisoned. It was a potion from farthest China—brought overland at great expense. It was already in your glass.” He reached into his robe and held up a small red-lacquered box.

“Not poisoned?” said I. “A shame. I was enjoying my resurrection. I had hoped to come back taller but then tall as well as roguishly handsome would be gilding the lily, wouldn’t it.”

“Would you like to wager on how long you might last? Two—three days, perhaps? Oh, that’s right, you can’t wager, can you? You have nothing.”

“True,” said I. “Yet you see a victory in what is a simple truth for all of us, is it not? We have nothing, we are nothing.” The truth was, I had been nothing, felt nothing but longing and grief, since news of my sweet Cordelia’s death from fever had reached me three months ago. I did not fear death nor even pain. I’d never have come to Brabantio’s palazzo if I had. That last moment, when I thought myself poisoned, I’d been relieved.

“Well, *you* are nothing. Would that you realized that before you brought ruin upon my daughter.”

“Portia? Oh, she’s not ruined. Bit sore, perhaps—might be walking a bit gingerly for a day or two from the rug burns, but she’s far from ruined. Think of her not as ruined, but simply as well used.”

Brabantio growled, then, red faced, he thrashed his head in the portal like a dirt-eating loony. (I thought he might burst a vein in his ancient forehead.) He seemed unable to form any retort but steamed and spittle, which I took as cue to continue.

“Like a new pair of boots,” I said, Brabantio’s potion having made me especially chatty. “Like new boots you might wear into the water, so that even while enduring the squish and slop of them for a while, they cure to a perfect fit, molded, as it were, by experience, to receive you and only you. At which point you have to throw them over a chair and have raucously up the bum!”

“No!” barked the senator, at which point he flung a brick at me that would have taken a kneecap had I not quickly pulled myself up by the chains. The brick thudded off the wall and splashed somewhere in the dark.

“The strained-boot metaphor what sent you round the bend, then?” said I, a jolly jingle of my chains for levity. “You’re short a brick now, you know? You’ve bollixed up the whole bloody edifice over a smidge o’ literary license, thou thin-skinned old knob-gobbler.”

“Tis my eldest, Desdemona, that’s ruined,” said the senator, pressing his point by placing a brick atop the wall.

“Oh, well, yes, but I can’t take credit for that,” said I. And I was, of course, lying about his young daughter. I’d never so much as been alone in a room with Portia. “No, Desdemona’s downfall is all Othello’s doing.”

Another brick joined its red brothers in line. Only the senator’s face was visible above them now.

“And but for your interference, he would be gone—or condemned, if I’d had my way. But no, you were in the ear of the doge like a gnat, making a case for your precious Moor, talking of Venice’s debt to him, spouting rhymes of how he was some noble hero instead of a sooty slave reaching beyond his

station.”

“Nobility and courage being frightening and foreign qualities to you—you piss-ant merchant, twat!”
The senator was sensitive about his nobility, or lack thereof. Venice was the only city-state in Italy, nay, the only state on the continent where there were no landed nobles, largely because there was no land. Venice was a republic, all authorities duly elected, and it rankled him. Only in the last few months had he convinced the doge and the council to allow senate seats to be inherited. And because he had no sons, Brabantio’s seat would go to the husband of his eldest daughter. Yes, the Moor.

“Strictly speaking, he didn’t really ruin her. I mean, she’s married to a general who will someday be a senator of Venice, so really, a step up from her bloodline, which I think you’d have to agree is as common as cat piss.”

He growled and flung another brick through the portal. This one took me on the front of one thigh, which should have been more painful than it was. Considering it, I suppose I should have been more concerned for my fate. Perhaps the Oriental powder had made me giddy.

“That’s going to leave a mark, Montessor.”

“Damn you, fool. I will silence you.” He went back to his masonry with a fury that was making him breathless. Soon he was down to the last brick, just a square of yellow light from the port.

“Beg for mercy, fool,” he said.

“I will not.”

“You won’t be able to drown yourself, I’ve made certain of that. You shall suffer, as you have made me suffer.”

“I care not. I care for nothing. Finish your bloody business and be off. I’m tired of listening to your whingeing. Give me my oblivion so I may join my heart, my love, my queen.” I bowed my head, closed my eyes, waited for the dark and what dreams may come. I don’t suppose it occurred to me that I could be both heartbroken *and* dead.

“Your queen did not die of fever, fool,” said Brabantio, a whisper now in the dark.

“What?”

“Poison, Fortunato. Formulated by one of Rome’s best apothecaries to mimic a fever, slow and deadly. Put into place soon after you arrived as emissary and spoke your queen’s strong opposition to our Crusade. Sent to Normandy on one of Antonio’s ships, and delivered by a spy recruited from her guard by Iago. We may not have landed nobles, but he who rules the sea, rules trade, and he who rules trade, rules the world.”

“No,” said I, the truth of it burning through the haze of the potion and grief like a fire across my soul. Hate had awakened me. “No, Montessor!”

“Oh, yes. Go join your queen, Fortunato, and when you see her, tell her ’twas your words that killed her.” He scraped the trowel around the opening, then fit the last brick and tamped it into place, plunging me into darkness as the water rose around my knees.

“For the love of God, Montessor! For the love of God!”

But the tapping had ceased and my last call on the senator’s conscience was drowned by his laughter, which faded, and was gone.

A Spot of Bother

A spot of bother, innit: walled up and chained in the lightless, lonesome cold, seawater rising to my ribs, silence except for my own breath and a steady drip somewhere above my head. Then a slight scraping from the other side of the new wall. Perhaps Brabantio gathering his tools.

“Brabantio, thou treacherous coal-souled wank-weasel!” said I.

Was that cackling I heard beyond the wall, or just the fading echo of my own voice? The chamber had to be connected to the lagoon, somehow, but I could not hear even a distant lapping of waves. The darkness was so complete that I could see only the phantoms that populate the back of the eyelid, like oil on black water—“cracks in the soul,” Mother Basil used to tell me before she would lock me in the cupboard at the abbey at Dog Snogging, where I was raised. “In the dark may you contemplate the cracks in your soul wherein leaks wickedness, Pocket.” Sometimes I would pass days contemplating the cracks in my soul until the dark and I made peace. Friends.

Recently I had thought I might make a friend of Death as well, meet its feathery oblivion with a soft embrace. My sweet Cordelia’s death had cleansed me of fear, of self-regard, and after weeks of drinking, of anger and control over most of my fluids. But now I was wide awake with both anger and anguish that my actions might have brought an end to my queen.

“Thou wretched pillar of syphilitic pheasant-fuck!” said I, in case the Montessor was still listening.

At least the water was warm. It being August, the lagoon had saved summer’s heat, yet I shivered. The drip of cold water tapped my left hand with the regularity of a ticking clock, and as soon as I would think of it, it would sting like a needle of ice. I found that if I stood straight, took my full weight upon my feet, I could rest my arms on a ledge of brick at the level of my shoulders, where the wall met the rounded vault of the ceiling. In that posture I could take the weight of my arms off my shackles, and the cold drip of water would splash harmlessly on the chains. But if I fell to a position where I might rest, put my weight on my back against the wall, let my hands go slack in the chains in the manner of a praying saint, the cold drip would again vex me like a tiny frost-pricked fairy, humping away at my joints, jolting me awake when I would drowse. I could not know then that the cruel sprite would hold the key to my very life.

But I *did* drowse, after a while, hanging in the warm water, dreams washing over me both pleasing and horrific, wrenched from the company of my loving Cordelia by the claws of a voracious beast, waking breathless in the dark chamber, wishing it had been real, relieved that it was not, until the full weight of the darkness would descend on me again.

“Pocket,” she had said, “I think I shall send you to Venice, to speak to them my mind on the Crusade they propose.”

“But, lamb, they know your mind. You’ve sent them a bundle of letters, royal seal, Queen of Britain, Wales, Normandy, Scotland, Spain—do we still rule Spain?”

“No, and *we* do not rule any of them. I rule.”

“I was using the royal *we*, wasn’t I, love? Bit of the old God-in-your-pocket plural fucking *we* you royals use when being just a singular enormous twat will not suffice.” I tilted my head and grinned, jingled a bell on my coxcomb in a manner most charming.

“You see, that’s why I must send you.”

“To convince them that you’re an enormous twat? I was speaking figuratively, love. You know I adore you, including and especially your specific lady bits, but I respect the awesome twattiness with which you wield dominion over the realm. No, I say send them another pound of royal seals and waxes with a resounding ‘Fuck off’ to the pope, in Latin. Signed Queen Cordelia, Britain, France, et cetera, et cetera, and after lunch I can try to impregnate you with a royal heir.”

“No,” she said, her delicate jaw quite set.

“Well, fine then,” said I. “We’ll send the letter, skip lunch, and go right to siring the heir. I’m feeling full of tiny princes, bustling to get out into the world and start plotting against one another.” I thrust my cod at her to show the palpable urgency of our progeny.

“No, that’s why I must send you,” she said, ignoring my eloquent gesture of prince pumpage. “No letter, dispatch, or herald can be even remotely as annoying as you. Only you can shame them for just how badly they bollixed up the last bloody Crusade. Only you, my darling fool, can convey just how ridiculous—and bloody inconvenient—I find their call to battle.”

“*Moi?*” said I, in perfect fucking French.

“*Toi, mon amour,*” said she, in the teasing tongue of the frog. She kissed me lightly on the eyebrow and danced across our bedchamber to a heavy table where lay paper, ink, and quill.

“The kingdom is going to shit. I need my loyal knights here as a show of strength against those who would usurp me. You need to make it clear to the Venetians that I have no intention of joining yet another holy Crusade, nor will anyone from any of my lands, or, if I can manage it, our allies. And I want you to wear your motley. I want my message to come from a fool.”

“But I am your king.”

“No you’re not.”

“The royal consort?” I ventured.

“I have, in my weaker moments, shagged a fool,” said she, her head bowed in shame.

“And married the same,” said I.

“I don’t think we should dwell on that, love. Go to them. Speak my mind. Dwell in their palace, drink their wine, learn their secrets, and leave them flustered, frustrated, and insulted, as I know only you can do.”

“But, lamb, sending a fool to the pope—”

“Oh, bugger the pope!”

“I think he already has someone to do that.”

“No, you needn’t worry about Rome. It’s Venice that’s behind this. Genoa has just kicked nine

shades of shit out of them and they need to raise money. They think a holy war will rebuild their navy and reopen the trade routes they've lost to the Genoans, but they'll not do it on the fortune of Cordelia. Go to Venice. And take Drool and Jeff with you."

"Salting the earth of *all* decorum, are we then?"

"Yes. Take your great drooling ninny and your monkey and your acid wit and inflict them upon the court of the doge. They dare not turn you away. And when you return, we will make an heir."

"I am your humble servant, milady," said I. "But we've still an hour before lunch, and—"

"Cry havoc, and let slip the trousers of most outrageous bonkilation!" said the queen, throwing off the sash of her gown and stepping out of it. "Off with your kit, fool!"

I so adored her when she let her warrior-queen armor fall and came silly and giggling into my arms



I heard footsteps on the other side of the newly bricked wall, heard them clearly, then the sound of a bucket dropping with a thud. So *I could* be heard down here. I don't know how long I had been in the dark, but the tide was still high, reaching to my chest. Perhaps Portia had returned from Florence, or a servant had come down to the cellar to retrieve some wine.

"Help! I've been walled up here in the dark by the bloody lunatic senator!" But what if it was Brabantio himself, wracked with guilt, returned to set me free? I gentled my discourse. "And by lunatic I mean a nutter of supreme refinement, exquisite taste, and—"

Before I could finish shouting my flattery, there came screaming from the other side of the wall—screaming so piteous and animal that even in my dismal state, I shuddered. It was the sound of slaughter, no doubt, and not a subtle blade slipped under a rib. Someone, a man, was suffering, calling unto God and the saints between howls of pain pitched with terror that crashed into a low wail, then were silent. I heard scrambling sounds like dry sticks snapping, then just the steady drip in my dark chamber.

I dared not call out. I did not want the attention of whoever had been on the other side of the wall for I was sure that no rescue would be forthcoming from there. So tuned was I for a sound from the other side that even the dripping water became a distraction, an annoyance amid devastation.

Time passed. An hour maybe. Perhaps only minutes.

Then a splash—inside my chamber.

I screamed. I jumped, pulling myself up by the chains as something in the water brushed my naked thigh, something heavy and alive, sinuous and strong. I stopped breathing, willing myself to become invisible in the dark, trying to become part of the wall. I felt a wash of current on my legs, as if driven by a large tail or fin. Perhaps there was enough slack in my chains that I might flip over, spread my legs into a split and find purchase with my heels on the ledge. I *am* an acrobat, trained and practiced for many more years than I was a pampered noble.

I threw my arms out to my sides as far as they would go; my feet lifted from the floor, assuming the posture of one being energetically crucified. I pulled my feet up behind me, scraping my heels and my bottom on the wall as I went. My feet encountered the vault of the ceiling, then I spread my legs and lowered, lowered, and finally my heels caught the ledge that a moment before had been at the level

my shoulders. The shackles were cutting into my forearms, and my arms trembled with the strain, but I was out of the water, my face only inches above it. At my fittest, I might have been able to hold that posture for a quick chorus of “Ale House Lily,” but now I was only a handful of breaths from doom. I opened my eyes wide so they might drink in any wayward light wandering in the room, but caught only the sting of my own sweat, which rolled down and dripped off my nose.

If only the Moor had let me sink in the Grand Canal and suck my own murky death when I had been ready . . . I would have gone, then, gladly shrugged off this mortal coil and stepped into dark oblivion. Then he’d made himself a pest of gallantry, but now, more desperate in hate than sorrow, I wanted to live, dammit.

Something broke the surface of the water, just in front of my face, I could feel it there.

“Take my head then, thou tarry devil! Choke on it!”

Whatever was in the water licked the drop of sweat from my nose.

CHORUS: *In Venice did a fool turned emissary find himself, and he, a royal consort—a prince by penetration, as it were—was invited into the senate, and into the homes of all the most high, where he did speak his lady’s displeasure at the pursuits of Crusade by the Venetians and the pope. And to his lady’s will, he, with utmost lack of decorum, did jape, joke, and jibe at the expense of all of his hosts, much to the amusement of himself and a few others. Thus did Pocket of Dog Snogging gain the favor and ear of the doge, Duke of Venice, leader of the senate, while among others prodded by his wit, enemies bubbled, conspiracies boiled, and grave threats were made upon his head. (The last upon the occasion of his monkey Jeff biting a senator’s wife on the nipple.)*

So it came to pass that on the evening that the fool received news that his lady, Queen Cordelia of Britain, France, Belgium, et al., had perished of a fever, he was in attendance at a ball at the palace of a senate councilman on the Grand Canal and received no comfort from the Venetians at court except wine and silent scorn. Overcome with grief, the fool cast himself in the canal to drown, but was yanked out by the scruff of the neck by a soldier . . .

He lay there on the pavers for a long time, in a puddle of canal water, weeping, great gasping sobs first, then commenced a breathless trembling, as if breath itself was born of a pain he could not bear. A thread of crystal drool ran from the tragedy of his face, shimmering in the torchlight as if the only thing keeping his soul tethered to earth. The Moor, in his fine blouse of golden silk, crouched over the fool, saying nothing.

A breath finally squeaked out of him, a whisper as weak as a fly dying on a windowsill. “She dead. My love.”

“I know,” said the Moor.

“You don’t know love. Look at you. You’re a soldier—a hard, scarred, killing thing—a weapon. You’ve had an alehouse whore or the odd widow of the conquered, maybe, but you don’t know love.”

“I know love, fool. Love may not be mine, but I know it.”

“You lie,” said the fool.

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