

Pursued

written by J. Vammer

based on The Winter's Tale by William Shakespeare

Note: This story takes place in Bohemia, during Hermione's absence from the Sicilian Court. Upon hearing the child was abandoned and Antigonus mauled to death, Paulina implores one of her waiting women to disguise herself and take Paulina's place, then leaves with Hermione in search of the lost child. They find her in the care of the Old Shepherd, and rather than relegate her to their life of even greater poverty as two women living on society's outskirts, they watch her from afar, only interacting as kindly women from the village.

### **Character List**

HERMIONE: 40, any ethnicity, character uses she/her pronouns, was once the Queen of Sicily, but fled when King Leontes accused her of an affair

PAULINA: 48, any ethnicity, character uses she/her pronouns, was a powerful gentlewoman at court but was widowed because of Leontes' orders, and fled with her best friend

*A one-room country cottage with a bed, table, two chairs, and hearth. Upstage left is the door to the outside with a small window. Dried flowers and herbs hang in clusters, a few pieces of poetry are tacked up, and maybe a bird's nest is built into the corner. A woman breathlessly runs up to the door before it flies open to reveal HERMIONE, a wild mess, who throws off her shawl and runs to the bedroom washbasin, screaming into the water. She pauses there a moment before drying her face on her dress, pulling a pen and page from the shelf, and going to the table to write.*

HERMIONE

*(writing)* When you find this, my love, know I am gone.

Camillo's told Perdita of her birth,  
and she and Florizel are sailing back  
to certain death in Sicily. I feel  
I should return with her, protect and ease  
transition to the court, which, as we know,  
will eat a woman whole— especially  
a wildflower like our girl.

*(looking up from the page)* Oh, why return?

She must not know her father sentenced her  
to certain death, assuming such great lust  
that she was of his friend, and not his own  
creation Oh! If he thought so of me  
what in his mind in times he spent alone,  
or yet, perhaps, wrapped round another, that  
might cause obsess enough so he suspected  
a failing vow within my loving eyes?

It matters little now, who'er she was—  
or he. *(writing again)* The thorns within Leonte's mind  
have caught and torn his reason, made him strange.

But ah, for her, to hold her near my heart,  
to tell her, finally, that she's of me, *(to herself again)*  
but she's already grown and I cannot  
protect her from—

this world. And least of all herself. This child  
I've loved and lost is wandering still; how could  
she find her way back to my side as is,  
a foreigner to the safe lands of my heart?  
Still, I must try.

*(seeing PAULINA'S book on the desk)*

But oh, Paulina, love, to part from you!  
The many filtering layers of love we teach  
to women's hearts mean every choice is hard;  
it's tumbled smooth, no clear-defined sides—

*Footsteps startle her and she hastily grabs a book  
and throws the pages into it, tossing it onto the bed  
as PAULINA enters the cottage, carrying a bundle  
of chamomile, and another of basil and mint.*

PAULINA

I've found you in the darkness yet again.  
Do you not miss the symphony of bees,  
Hermione?

HERMIONE

Goddess of spring! And look,  
already taming the basil and mint's invasion!  
But their ambition can be boiled to please.  
I'll go and heat some water for a tea  
while you go cool your sunkissed face and neck.

*As she speaks, HERMIONE gathers the bundles and  
quicky moves to the small hearth. PAULINA washes  
in the basin by the bed.*

PAULINA

Ah me, such sweet relief! Oh hello, you,  
small spider friend, were you there in my hair?  
*(laughs heartily to herself, her face in a towel, as  
HERMIONE begins to cry)*

I thought— amidst the radishes— that we  
might clear that bramble by the creek to grow  
a blackberry— Oh! Chamomile's meant to bring  
one calm and ease, but you are locked in rue!  
Bohemia's bounty fails to heal!

HERMIONE

My heart  
is weighting down my lighter spirits. This morn  
I heard the news our dear Perdita and Florizel  
have fled this paradise for certain death  
in Sicily. Camillo ports them now  
across the sea, the fool! The king will kill,  
on sight, the son of his enrivaled friend,  
and kill again the girl he holds as proof  
of false liaisons fashioned out of fear.

PAULINA

Oh love! What leaden news! She now embarks  
toward her land of birth, where she might find  
the truth and see you as you are without  
the thin-worn rags that bar your shared embrace,  
and yet she may be sailing to her end!  
Oh love, my love!

HERMIONE

And you! And you- And you.  
I could not leave your side: my guiding star,  
the one who speaks the language of my heart,  
who shares the losses of my life, to lift,  
between us, the load that fate has tried me with.

## PAULINA

Whate'er we seek to do, it's better done  
together. A world that might destroy us each  
alone, has far less strength to smother when  
united.

## HERMIONE

Alas, my girl! She rides alone  
into this viper pit, but were I there,  
I know not how I'd save her! Last I tried,  
Leontes, oh that ever-poisoned name,  
reversed the promise made our wedding day,  
the vows I then was happy to apply,  
and in their place the cold reserve of hate  
that e'en my pain, new-healing from love's birth,  
could nothing soften. Fear of lost dominion,  
o'er me, our children, life, and happy home  
spoke louder than my love. So she, our babe,  
her early urge to coo turned to a scream  
I shared, implored fate to keep her safe  
in ways it kept from me. And here she grew,  
returned to her native, easy laugh,  
her past removed, the natural life restored,  
and like a delicate daisy follows the sun,  
she flourished for Florizel to pick— that boy,  
so sweet— he's all I'd dreamed for her, but so  
untried, and she so naked of defense,  
a lifetime's preparation lost to us!

## PAULINA

Hush, now! The same refrain plays in my soul  
and yet, I know, all is not lost! She needs  
her mother now more than before, for you  
can show the safest path. A lighthouse speaks  
the language of the seas to guide a ship;  
you'll warn of sharpened edges in our world  
and keep her clear of wrecking on the reefs.

## HERMIONE

But us! What of us, what of this, of this!  
Unwed, unnamed, perhaps we'd carry on,  
but this, in court, imagine, oh, the war  
they'd wage perceiving our rebellion?  
For us, it's love, for them high tyranny,  
that women should own themselves within a union,  
to which men gain no invite nor no power!  
What good are we to her if we're in jail?

## PAULINA

Hermione! There's ways and means and force  
applied properly! You know, as I,  
(MORE)

PAULINA (CONT'D)

the secrets of the court hang perilously.  
 If we pluck one or two full-ripened, we  
 will turn the hungry mouths toward our favor.  
 We cannot change the structure of the world,  
 but she, this girl I cherish as my own,  
 for her we'll gather all we've learned, so she,  
 now building on our losses, charges forward,  
 full-armed to wield her fate herself! And thus,  
 we must find means to get to her!

HERMIONE

Alright!  
 We are agreed. We'll fast prepare to board  
 this evening's sunset ship for Sicily!

*HERMIONE exits to get the laundry. PAULINA  
 pulls a large satchel from below the bed, tosses two  
 piles of clothes onto the bed, then sits, landing on  
 the book. She opens it and discovers the letter. She  
 reads.*

HERMIONE

*(re-entering)* I think it best if we wear common clothes,  
 but take our palace finery, just in case  
 our life there proves too lightly sketched and they  
 have thrown belongings to the sea or fire.  
 Paulina?

*HERMIONE sees the letter in her hand.*

PAULINA

Did not you say you could not leave me here?

HERMIONE

Paulina, a moment of desperation-

PAULINA

I understand the need to save your daughter,  
 yet what of us, our lives, of me, my thoughts,  
 the years we've spent together— you would leave?

HERMIONE

Paulina—

PAULINA

A letter! No chance to plead my case,  
 no solving this together, just I, the weight  
 that must be loosed or quickly left behind,  
 to follow on your heels just as a dog?  
 Oh! I could shake you but I know your mind  
 so well! And further still I love you, yet  
 I do not favor you so well right now!

## HERMIONE

Paulina, I have been the worst of loves.  
 There is no reason great enough that I  
 should leave you. You, who pled my case so well  
 when I could barely stand. Who told me what  
 to do and where to go when mine and 'dita's  
 lives were threatened. You, who journeyed far  
 on rumors she was alive and thriving here,  
 not knowing what we'd find, but keeping hope  
 alive. My love, I owe my life to you.  
 I shudder to admit I was prepared,  
 without a glance cast back for you, to run-  
 supposing, hoping, you would understand  
 in that sweet way I've grown accustomed to.  
 But yes, you're right, that was not fair to you,  
 nor to our love, to live a lie when you've  
 become my truth as much as she!

## PAULINA

Then you must fight for me just as for her!  
 This fleeing, fluttering version of yourself-  
 Yes! His greed has stolen your son and daughter.  
 Yes! His fear has stolen your wealth and comfort.  
 Yes! His anger has stolen your self conviction.  
 But love, I've soothed you back into yourself  
 as one might calm a horse whose eyes are white  
 from stepping, unwitting, upon a rattling snake.  
 Now you are whole again, and on return,  
 I cannot stand for you when facing wrongs-  
 reproachment from my lips is only vengeance,  
 from yours, it gives the chance to be redeemed-  
 a gift that weights your words as gold to him  
 and gives him hope to face his many wrongs.  
 Cry, if you must, or scream if you must, but stand!  
 If only so you know your life's your own,  
 you've won your place through risking losing all!  
 You can forgive, invite him to atone,  
 and through your grace, you'll earn your life's desires.

## HERMIONE

Here, in this beautiful place, this simple life,  
 where challenge is as easy as staying alive,  
 I'd forgotten the machinations of the court  
 where deadly games and intrigue reign supreme.  
 This natural world's a place I understand-  
 my hands can fix what's broken, find what's lost.  
 I pluck a fruit and save the seeds for planting  
 and know, with sun and water, what I'll find.  
 I struggle with the games-

## PAULINA

It is no game  
 to ask for what you need when you've been wronged!  
 To stand for your beliefs and your convictions!  
 To shriek when burned, to strike at threats, to be  
 your own best champion. Love, you're worthy, yes,  
 you are, no less than he, or I, or any.  
 We women are easy targets in this world,  
 controlled from birth in looks and voice and choice.  
 But peel this outer casing and inside  
 is human: messy, unrefined, impulsive,  
 witty, striving, caring, self-serving, bitchy!  
 It's here, and here, in him, and them and all!  
 And you deserve to dig your heels in earth,  
 to feel your starstuff's width and depth and height,  
 to face relentless taking of your space,  
 your soul, your life, and boldly say "no more!"  
 Your fall was not your fault, it was a grab,  
 to catch you unawares and steal the space  
 you take within the world. You cannot yield!  
 This life's a gift, so fight for happiness,  
 you never know how good it just may get!

## HERMIONE

I've been asleep. From henceforth no half-joys,  
 concessions of my life, identity.  
 My fear, while it's my own, induced half-life,  
 a watered copy scurrying through my moments  
 instead of me, in vivid glory, savoring.  
 If I return I'm his on parchment only.  
 If he repents I'll offer open hands  
 and rule beside him once again as friends.  
 But he'll not freely have my love nor body  
 and every day I will come home to you.  
 He should face death for wrongful accusations  
 that killed my son, and stole my life and daughter-  
 it is a mercy to sit with him in state  
 to heal appearances, but stay as yours.  
 I'll stand, demanding this configuration,  
 reminding him how else it could have gone.  
 So I forgive by not abandoning contracts,  
 and I forget by living in your arms.

## PAULINA

And when they talk, which surely soon they will?

## HERMIONE

Of all the open secrets, this is middling.  
 Soon all minds will grow tired of the game,  
 and like the tree you miss until it blossoms,  
 they'll no more perceive our quiet love.



## PAULINA

Then I consent, this plan supports all parties  
and while still short of dreams, the logic holds.  
I love you, and romancing practicalities  
is how our childlike hopes survive this world.

## HERMIONE

Together, we will face the seas ahead,  
and build the world we'd rather see instead.

*They gather items into satchels as the lights fade to  
black and the sound of a wave crashes on a distant  
shore.*

END OF PLAY