

## The Society of Rhyme

Be welcome, dear stranger—come and take part;  
Join us, dear guest—if you have the heart.  
You may enter in if our wisdom you share,  
So, friend, light your candle if only you dare.

The chamber was dark and heavy, filled with a silence that hung over one like a waterlogged quilt. Edward entered slowly, followed by a dull thud as the oaken door swung shut behind him. A muffled murmuring and rustling of coats rose, rapidly descending into noiseless black once more. Then nothing.

Nothing until, quite suddenly, Edward's candle winked into existence, illuminating the silver wolf mask under which his face hid, pale and flushed. Another candle followed, then three more, and all at once the chamber was filled with those small, flickering lights, revealing other masked faces—some like thieves and bandits, others like revelers at masquerades. Still no one moved. Still there reigned silence.

At last a voice spoke, jovial, yet prickling at Edward's skin until he felt hot and red.

“Back at last! You were missed greatly, my Lord!  
We've carried on in your absence—of that, be assured.”

The man speaking strode across the room; the others parted before him as waves before a ship. His scarlet fox mask covered his face completely, save his eyes which glinted, dark and somber in the candlelight.

Grimacing behind his mask, Edward nodded at him. “Dear sir, your words make me glad; Now that we are reunited, I no longer feel sad.”

Edward winced inwardly, recognizing the offbeat rhythm and cheapness in his rhyme. He saw the fox mask shift almost imperceptibly, the man's eyes narrow in what was surely a frown.

“You've been away for quite a long time,” he murmured.  
“It would be prudent of you to practice your rhyme.”

Edward barely suppressed a shiver. “Have patience, I beg. It is as you said; Time spent away has addled my head.”

The suspicious light faded from behind the fox mask, and the man tilted his head in acknowledgment before addressing the crowd.

“While I’m sure you are eager to hear the king’s tale—  
His marvelous adventures, and all they entail,  
Let us first celebrate his return with a feast!  
After all he has done, he’s owed that at least.”

Murmuring in approval, the crowd gathered ‘round a table laden with food which Edward could have sworn had not been there but a moment before.

The man in the fox mask leaned towards him, speaking in low tones meant for no other ears save his own.

“I myself am impatient to talk;  
Partake in the feast, then come, let us walk.”

Edward nodded mutely, chose a small apricot from the table, and, not trusting his stomach to handle anything more, left with the fox-masked man.

They came into a dimly lit hallway, walking in silence. A few minutes passed before Edward realized the man was waiting for him to speak.

He forced a contented sigh. “Words cannot express how I’ve missed this place; Those long nights away I spent cold and awake.”

The fox-masked man did not respond, but bowed his head to the floor. Edward saw his shoulders tense every so slightly.

They continued to walk, and the longer they spent without speaking, the faster Edward’s heart beat, the shakier his legs grew, the queasier his stomach felt.

Finally, the man spoke, but the words that followed made Edward wish he hadn’t.

“Apricot? A strange choice for you.”

He plucked the apricot from Edward's hand, turning it over in his own before finishing the couplet.

“William was not just my king, but my brother too.”

Edward's heart leapt to his mouth.

The man released a shuddering breath. “Do not think for a moment that I could not tell! William hated apricots. I knew him well!”

He flung the fruit aside, stepping towards Edward with red eyes—from pain or anger, none could say.

“And we never assonate, you liar! You snake!  
I see you're afraid! You cower! You quake!  
Where is my brother? Do not think to lie!  
If you speak the truth, you've no need to die.”

The truth?

If this man knew the truth, Edward would certainly die.

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The man in the fox mask re-entered the chamber, closing the door gently behind himself. He looked 'round the room a moment, then spoke in a trembling voice, barely louder than the soft conversations and stifled laughter, yet silencing the room nonetheless.

“The wolf is dead, slain by a snake.  
Our king has been killed; that man was a fake.  
The death of my brother is a wound that cuts deep—  
I must now away, so I can mourn him and weep.”

Edward turned on his heel and left the room. All fell silent and dark once more.