

Into the

Abyss

Vault of Verona

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Sample Chapters

Chapter One

Harriet Hunter threw herself down onto her bed, crushing the stray clothes and dog eared novels scattered across the blanket. Though the clothes overflowed from Harriet's dresser drawers onto the timber floorboards of her room, her collection of soccer and dancing medals from years past stood neatly in rows on the shelves of her desk. Everything had a place in Harriet's world, it just wasn't always in it. She sighed loudly as she yanked a folded sheet of paper from the backpack tossed haphazardly beside the bed. Another English assignment. It felt like just yesterday that Harriet had finished an English exam: how could it possibly be time for another? Scowling, Harriet rolled over and concentrated on reading the instructions at

the top of the paper. Romeo and Juliet. Great. If ever there was a story where women were meek, mild and boring, this was it. Who stabs themselves in the heart just because some guy with a fancy hairdo and a cape drank some poison? Honestly.

Harriet humphed as she flipped over to the criteria page, scowling as she hunted for the word count. Rewrite part of Shakespeare's play using an example Mrs Wellington had not covered in class, in 600 words or less. No problem.

Harriet was an exceptional writer. She sat up, just a little bit brighter than her whole weekend wasn't lost, and eased her laptop out of the computer bag. She briefly considered what her mother would say if she could see her now. There would be plenty about how much her desk had cost, and how slouching causes bad posture. But the bed was just so much more inviting. Settling herself comfortably with her back to the headboard, Harriet tapped 'Harrypotter' into the password box and hit enter, her tongue between her teeth. Snatching up a pencil from the bedside table, Harriet tapped the criteria page, searching for a story option that caught her interest.

“Hmmm...nope,” Harriet muttered to herself, as she crossed out the option of Juliet marrying Paris. “Boring”.

Harriet scanned down the page, rejecting suggestion after suggestion until she was out of ideas. None of the predefined concepts caught her interest, or inspired her to begin writing. She considered the last option, an open invitation to fracture the story in some way. She tapped her pencil against her computer as her brain whirred, sifting through the character types they had read in class. She certainly didn’t want to write about a meek Juliet, or about a Romeo whom she had perceived as a spoiled young man with a thirst for violence. Harriet was much more interested in strong women, people like Emma Watson who stood up for what they believed in. But Emma was a modern woman, and she had to deal with one stuck back in the middle ages.

Harriet’s brain snapped into focus like the last line falling into place on a Rubix cube. There was no reason why she couldn’t change the characters to make them more modern...she could create an interesting, dynamic Juliet who wouldn’t back down from a fight with anyone.

Make Juliet's character into a modern woman,
Harriet mused. Interesting. This might just do. Harriet slapped a piece of scrap paper on the lid of her laptop and sketched a few quick ideas. She drew a passable sketch of Juliet's face, although something looked a little wonky or lopsided, like most of Harriet's attempts at art. The face that emerged wasn't the face of Olivia Hussey in the 1968 film version they'd watched in class. Nor was it the image of Claire Danes, who'd acted alongside Leo and worn those feathered wing things. It was a strong face that appeared – it was the image of a woman who knew what she wanted. A firm chin, mobile mouth and spirited eyes stared back from the paper at Harriet. Long brown hair, fierce brows and high cheekbones completed the drawing. Harriet pursed her lips as she shaded in the last of the hair, and tilted her head as she scribbled. Unwittingly, she had created an image that melded elements of what looked like her own face with those she imagined Juliet possessed. Or would have possessed anyway, if she'd had a spine of her own and had stood up to the myriad of people who wanted to run her life for her. Harriet wouldn't consider herself a feminist. Not in the way that traditional feminists were

viewed anyway. She thought of herself as more of an equalist, if there was such a thing. Men and women, navigating the world together on terms that suited them individually. She'd never understood why girls couldn't play soccer, or boys couldn't dance ballet. She'd done both, and although she hadn't been the best at either one, she'd had fun.

There had been something about the story of Romeo and Juliet that had irked Harriet as the class worked their way through the laborious Shakespearean text. More, it had rankled that the other girls in her class had seemed unconcerned about how Juliet was portrayed. They didn't see anything unusual or wrong in Juliet's actions and choices, or the way she meekly accepted the edicts of the men around her. Even her ultimate act of impassioned suicide was spurred on by the loss of a man. Sure, Romeo was a pretty good catch, all things considered. But whether it's really worth dying for the lost love of another was a bit of a stretch. And there had to be a better way to get out of marrying Paris than pretending to kill yourself. Such a risky endeavour, especially in medieval Italy. Harriet's classmates had snickered when she'd offered her thoughts on that matter.

She could still see Gracie Finkle smirking at her from between two of the most popular boys in the grade. They were boys who would never look twice at Harriet. She knew it, and so did Gracie Finkle. Harriet constantly told herself that she didn't care anyway, they were boys and they were gross. But there was a little part of Harriet that was starting to care, and it irritated her.

Harriet was jolted from her reverie by her father's voice booming up the stairway towards her bedroom. Dinner was ready, and she was expected, pronto. Harriet tucked the drawing into the side of her folded laptop, threw the computer carelessly on the bed and headed downstairs for dinner.

Logan Hunter was standing in the kitchen, portioning out mashed vegetables and pork chops. Harriet swiped a finger through the steaming mashed potatoes as her father turned back to put the frying pan on the stove.

"I saw that."

Harriet smiled cheekily, as Logan turned and raised an eyebrow at her.

In the distance, Harriet heard the front door slam shut and the jingle of her mother's keys. "I'm home," she called out, appearing around the corner and into the dining room. She was

balancing mountains of paperwork, a laptop and a handbag in her arms. Logan rushed to help his wife unload her bags as Harriet scooped up the silverware from the kitchen counter.

“Where are the monsters?” Harriet asked, registering the unusual quiet in the lower level of the house. Her question was answered by the whooping of her two brothers who had spied their mother from outside. They came rushing in from the sunny backyard, still light but with the lengthening shadows of a long summer. Carolyn Hunter kissed her boys on the cheek as they danced around her, each one as filthy as the next. She laughed.

“Wash your hands, boys,” she said, kissing her husband’s cheek as well. She ran her hand over Harriet’s long brown hair as she walked past, setting the table for dinner. Logan returned to the kitchen and finished dishing out the peas.

“What did you do today, Harriet?” he asked, deftly catching a stray pea as it tried to escape from one of the plates.

“Nothing, really,” Harriet said in a non-committal tone. Logan exchanged a look with his wife over Harriet’s head. Carolyn shook hers.

“Surely you did something, sweetie!” Carolyn said in a bright voice. Harriet didn’t respond. They’d had this argument before, and she wasn’t looking to get into it again. Last time she’d almost been forced to join the school netball team. Harriet shuddered.

“I have an English assignment to do,” Harriet said, trying to distract her parents. “I have to rewrite Romeo and Juliet in some other way. I thought about making Juliet a little more modern, and a little less of a door mat.”

Carolyn pursed her lips. She glanced at Logan before she answered. “That sounds like a great idea,” she said, watching her husband’s reaction. He grunted.

“Never understood why he didn’t check a little more thoroughly that she was dead in the first place,” he said, transferring plates from the counter to the table. “But I don’t remember the story very well; it’s been a while since I was in high school.”

Mason and Tristan tumbled back into the dining room, hands clean from scrubbing. They sat down in their chairs, chattering to each other like little monkeys. Harriet and her parents took their seats.

“You know,” said Carolyn. “I never understood why you stopped playing soccer.” So they weren’t going to avoid this again.

“Wasn’t interested,” Harriet replied, through a mouthful of mashed potatoes.

“But...aren’t you bored?” Carolyn asked, her brow wrinkled. “All you ever do is read books.”

“That’s not a bad thing, Carolyn,” Logan replied in a mild tone. “I quite enjoy a good book myself.”

“Yes honey,” said Carolyn, a note of impatience in her tone. “But Harriet is a young lady, she should be out with her friends, shopping, playing netball, even dancing. What about looking into dancing again, Harriet?”

Logan sat silently, cutting his meat as Harriet made a production out of chewing her food.

“I don’t really think I’d be any good at it now, Mum,” Harriet said, finally. “I’m not stick thin, and all the girls my age are getting up on pointe shoes now. I’d be like a dancing elephant.”

Logan frowned at the last comment. Carolyn blew out an exasperated breath.

“Well that’s a little dramatic, don’t you think? You’re built well for dancing!”

“I have your thighs...isn't that what you always say? And you refuse to wear a swimsuit because of those thighs. I refuse to wear a leotard and prance around in tights and little else.”

The boys were watching the exchange between Harriet and their mother, their heads whipping back and forth like spectators at a tennis match. Harriet's face was mulish and threatened a brewing storm, and Carolyn's wasn't far behind. They'd always clashed, ever since Harriet was a little girl. Her grandmother said it was because they were so similar, but Harriet thought she was more like her father.

“It wouldn't hurt to try something new, would it Harriet?” Logan said, sensing impending doom and desperately trying to avoid it.

Harriet had heard enough. She always felt like she wasn't enough, like she didn't do what was expected of her as her mother's daughter. She pushed back from the table.

“Thanks for dinner Dad,” she said, her tone soft and a little shaky. “I'm going to go up to bed, I've had enough...to eat. May I please be excused?” It came out more as a demand than a question.

Logan sighed wearily and glanced at his wife. Carolyn remained silent, her eyes locked on her daughter's face.

"Go," Logan said, his tone softer than his words. Harriet knew that he tried to keep the peace, and felt sorry for her role in his need to do that. It was difficult to control her responses and she knew that another prod from her mother would send her temper soaring. Harriet deposited her plate on the bench and took the steps to her room two at a time. She swung her door shut behind her and flung herself down on her bed, face first. Screaming silently into the pillow, she let out the frustration that these encounters with her mother created in her. Both were strong women, and for that reason they clashed on a regular basis. It frustrated Harriet no end, and she felt as though she would never be good enough for her mother just as she was. Carolyn was a partner working at a top tier law firm, an important and powerful woman in her professional sphere. Harriet knew that her mother wanted that kind of success for her, but for now, Harriet just wanted to enjoy herself. She'd seen what it had taken for her mother to reach the top of the corporate ladder and she wasn't sure she wanted that kind of life for herself. She dreamt of writing

– her own stories out there for other people to enjoy.

A tinkling *ding* from Harriet's bedside table caught her attention. She rolled her head to the side and opened one eye. She saw that a message had flashed up on the screen, and Harriet grabbed the phone and partly sat up to read it. It was from Tessa, Harriet's closest friend. Despite her mood, she grinned as she read Tessa's latest gripe about her boyfriend, Todd. Though Harriet was glad she didn't have to deal with the seemingly constant drama of having a boyfriend, she was a little envious at times of the dates Tessa went on with Todd. All of the girls in her grade seemed to be pairing off with the boys, though Harriet doubted that they all really liked each other. It was a status symbol to have a boyfriend, and the girls who didn't were looked at askance. Harriet felt the judgment as she walked to her locker alone, or as she moved between classes without someone hanging off her arm. It bothered her, but not enough for her to pretend that she liked any of the boys who had asked her out. Especially Gideon White. They'd been friends since the first grade, for goodness sake. There was no way that she'd view him as anything more than a brother, no matter

how hard their friends pushed to get them together.

Harriet settled in for a fast paced text conversation and soon forgot about Gideon, the fight with her parents and the paper peeking out the side of her laptop. Even as she grew tired and settled down into her pillows, the assignment remained forgotten, obscured by talk of plans for trips to the beach on the school holidays. As Harriet's eyes grew heavy, she reached out instinctively to put her phone on the charger, then snuggled deeper into her pillows. Before long she was asleep, the Romeo and Juliet assignment left to another day.

Chapter Two

The storm that echoed the one in Harriet's heart flew through her open windows in the early hours of the morning. Usually at this time, the Tasmanian air was still, heavy and laden with the promise of a new day. But in the wee hours of this morning, the air was alive, kicked up by squally winds that made Harriet's curtains billow. Although the thunder rumbled and the lightening flashed, there was only a light rain that failed to pull Harriet from her deep sleep. She snuggled closer into the pillow and pulled the blankets up around her neck as the air cooled considerably.

There was a tinkling crash as one of Harriet's tiny tot ballet medals fell from a high shelf of her desk to the one below. The stormy air swirled through the room, making clothes hanging from the drawers flutter and sway. Harriet's drawing of her Juliet character was pulled and tugged by the swirling gales from its place in the closed laptop, finally popping

out as a particularly strong wind gust rattled the windows and screens. It fluttered through the air, dancing with the wind, before settling next to Harriet's open hand. Her other hand was tucked under her face, cushioning her head. Harriet sensed the fluttering paper beside her, and through a haze of sleep she instinctively put a hand out to stop it from flying away. Drowsily, she tucked the sheet more securely under her arm, up near her face and the pillow.

Her dreams were particularly vivid tonight. Screaming horses and clashing swords; heavy, trailing gowns and billowing headdresses flashed behind her eyes. Harriet shifted restlessly in her sleep, the drawing crumpling slightly under her shoulder as she flipped over. As the wind died off and the curtains lay still again, Harriet, drifted down into a deep sleep, a frown on her face.

Harriet rose to the jaunty chirping of birds outside her window. She rolled over sleepily, trying to avoid the beam of sunshine that fell onto her face as the curtains shifted in the breeze. She felt unusually warm, quite hot even, and through

her sleepy state Harriet registered confusion. Had her parents left the heating on, perhaps? She stretched lazily beneath the covers, knowing it was Saturday morning and unless she wanted to watch cartoons, there was little else she needed to rise for. A few hours with the Romeo and Juliet story writing and she'd be done. She just needed to go online to know a little more about what it was like living as a woman in Shakespeare's time before she could start planning.

Harriet sighed and rolled over, burying her head under the pillows, just as the door to her room crashed open and a foreign, heavily accented voice rang out.

"Juliet! It is morning, Juliet! And what a morning it is!" Harriet sat up abruptly in bed, disoriented and confused. She watched blearily as a heavy set woman in a plain, serviceable and, quite frankly, huge, gown bustled around the room. She winced as the woman swished the curtains back and deftly tied them. Then she stared at the heavy, embroidered drapes adorning the windows, instead of her white, sheer curtains. And the walls surrounding the windows! Gone were the white plastered walls with posters of her favourite bands and movies. In its place was

a heavy, dark stone wall, the blocks huge and intimidating.

Harriet's eyes widened as her gaze swept around the room. She registered the huge four poster bed she was lying in, very different to her own serviceable double ensemble. Beginning to panic a little, Harriet realised she was no longer in her own room. The air was different here, heavier and warmer as she had felt before, and she was surrounded by things that were foreign to her. Her heart beat faster as sleep fully receded and she remembered there was still someone else in the room with her.

"Juliet!" Harriet jumped as the older woman barked the name. "What are you still doing abed! We must dress you and get you ready, today is not the day to dally! Come child! There are Lords and Ladies from all over the land arriving today. They'll all wish to see you before the wedding tomorrow."

Wait. Hold on. What now? Wedding?

Harriet's mind scrambled. Where on earth WAS she?

"Ah there it is," the older lady crooned as she extracted a delicate, braided gold headband from the robe in the corner. She polished the band on her sleeve as she advanced on the bed. "This one has been in the Capulet family

for generations. It's only fitting that you wear it today to greet your guests."

Capulet? Harriet's eyes popped wide open. She yanked the covers up and frantically searched for her drawing. For her laptop, for anything from a time she remembered. Her hands touched the crisp, white drawing paper as she skated them desperately under her mountain of pillows. Breathing a sigh of relief that at least something still remained as it had been before, she pulled the sheet out and glanced at it. It was identical to the drawing from the night before. The same face stared back at her, partially her own features mixed in with those of someone else. "What have you got there?" the old lady asked as she stoked the fire in the corner. A large pitcher stood next to its cheery warmth, welcoming despite the heat of the day. "Come child, why so lazy today?" It took some labouring on Harriet's part to understand the words delivered in the thickly accented voice. Was that Italian? Her languages teacher at school didn't sound like that when she ran through numbers and colours in Italian class.

Capulet. Italian. Juliet. Harriet's mind raced as she frantically recalled the characters in Romeo and Juliet. She couldn't remain mute

forever, sooner or later she'd have to say something.

"Nurse?" Harriet asked, tentatively.

"Who else would I be? What's wrong with you, young lady?" Nurse demanded, her hands fisted on her hips and her face flushed pink. Her grey hair was starting to curl around her face from the heat and exertion. She blew a curl back from her eye and began to shift something heavy on the other side of an ornate screen standing in the corner of the room, near the fire. Nurse grunted as whatever it was screeched and groaned as it was wrestled into place.

Harriet's mind raced as she tried to wrap her head around what was happening. She shoved the drawing back under the pillow instinctively, wanting to keep her little piece of home safe. Reluctantly, she crawled out of bed and stood on the bare floor that was not her own. Gone were the warm timber floorboards underneath her bed. Instead, her feet had found cold stone, chilly despite the hot morning. Uncertainly, Harriet stood, her arms wrapped around herself. She watched as Nurse bent over to pick up a towel from behind the screen, her large bottom waving in the air.

“There. That ought to do it. Lord’s mercy child, don’t just stand there!” Nurse demanded as she turned around, puffing slightly. “Get in the tub!”

Harriet looked around for a bathtub from her own time. There was a large container that looked like a cauldron in the corner, mostly hidden by the screen. Nurse had been pushing and pulling that into place – this must be what she was referring to.

“Gown off!” Nurse demanded, as she turned around with a pail of water in her hands.

That jolted Harriet from her dream state. She blinked at Nurse and her mind balked at the command. She didn’t want to disrobe in front of a total stranger, and she crossed her arms over her chest protectively. Even though she knew Nurse’s character from reading the story of Romeo and Juliet, she didn’t understand how on earth she seemed to be *in* the story. It was a work of fiction, dreamed up by the mind of Shakespeare. It made no sense for Harriet to be here. Yet, her surroundings told her that she likely was, and Nurse’s crossed arms and darkening expression suggested that her patience was running out. Harriet had to do something...she had to go along with this

and see how it played out. She didn't see another option at this point in time.

"Come on my Lady, we don't have all day!" Exasperation and impatience rang in Nurse's voice.

Harriet wasn't yet ready to expose herself as a fraud, not until she knew if it was dangerous. Neither did she want to get undressed.

"I...I can do it myself, Nurse," Harriet said timidly.

"Of course you can't, my Lady!" Nurse said crossly. "This pitcher weighs more than you do. Now hop in and sit down. The Blessed Mother knows there isn't a freckle on your body I've not seen before, having nursed you since you were a babe. Hurry now." Nurse's arms were straining and her face was turning decidedly red. Harriet hurried to strip off her nightgown, staring at the rich embroidery on the long sleeves and the lace adorning much of the top half. These were certainly not her pyjamas, or the clothes she'd fallen asleep in the night before. Self-consciously, Harriet climbed into the tub and shivered as her skin touched the cold surface. She sat down uneasily and tried to remain as modest as she could.

Without ceremony, Nurse dumped the contents of the pitcher straight over Harriet's

head. Spluttering and gasping, Harriet pushed hunks of long, wet brown hair out of her eyes. Just as she was getting her breath back, another stream of water cascaded down her face. For the third assault, she managed to tilt her head back, which at least kept her hair out of her eyes. Nurse began to scrub at her back and hair, cleaning it for all she was worth. Harriet winced as her hair was pulled, hard. Clearly, conditioner was not a thing in the middle ages.

Nurse spoke quietly as Harriet was bathed, talking about this and that. Harriet tried pinching her arm, to wake herself from what seemed like an incredibly vivid dream. She kept pinching until an angry bruise rose on the skin of her arm. Harriet stared at the purpling skin, proof that this situation was very real. Tears welled up in her eyes and panic clawed at her throat. Fear and confusion reigned over her, in stark contrast to the calm that Nurse exuded. The tears ran helplessly down her cheeks, mingling with the water from the pitcher and hiding her distress from Nurse's keen eyes.

Harriet had remained silent as her mind battled to accept what was happening. As her fear quietened under Nurse's soothing touch and her heavily accented voice lulled her,

Harriet's tears stopped and she began to focus on her words. Her brain began to make connections as it calmed, and she tried to pick up clues about where she was, what was happening and what she might expect to happen in the coming hours.

"You're very quiet, my Lady," Nurse said.

She sighed when Harriet did not respond.

"I know this situation isn't your first choice,"

Nurse said in an unsteady tone. "But he's a good man and he'll take care of you." Harriet inclined her head stiffly.

"Fifteen is too young for a bride, in my opinion. But what would I know." Harriet's eyes widened at that. Fifteen! "If you'd just agreed to a long engagement with Paris, he would have waited until your sixteenth birthday, at least. Now...well. The wedding's tomorrow and we do what we must."

Harriet's stomach dropped. Clearly, she hadn't dropped into a boring part of the play.

Her mind raced as she tried to recall the events leading up to this moment. What had happened to Juliet? Ah. Well. Yikes.

Harriet tried frantically to piece together everything she could remember about the play, every little detail. Romeo and Juliet met at a party. They loved each other at first sight, even though their families were locked

in a bitter blood feud. Romeo had snuck into the Capulet Manor to see Juliet and Friar Lawrence had married them in secret. Romeo had fought with Tybalt, Juliet's cousin, and had killed him. His punishment had been banishment, and if he returned to Verona he would be killed on sight. Juliet had been commanded to marry Paris, kinsman to Prince Escalus. He was handsome and wealthy, but Juliet felt nothing for him. It was all about Romeo. Juliet faked her death, Romeo took his own and was followed into the abyss by Juliet at the loss of her love. Harriet blew out a breath. What to do? Which part of the story were they currently in. And more importantly, why was she in it? How was she in it? Questions swirled relentlessly through Harriet's brain. She picked up the towel from the edge of the tub and stood shyly, stepping out of the tub and drying herself off as discreetly as possible. She wrapped the towel tightly around herself and turned, only to have her vision abruptly cut off as Nurse threw a shift over her head. Instinctively, Harriet stuck out her arms and managed to find the right holes in the garment. The towel followed the fine material as it slithered down her body, ending below her knees. She whisked her towel off the

floor and, with little other option, headed over to the fire where Nurse had seated herself on a chair with a step stool in front. Harriet sat on the stool and Nurse reached out to spread her hair back from her shoulders. She began brushing.

Despite her racing mind, Harriet found herself lulled by the rhythm of Nurse's brush strokes. She was abruptly brought back to earth and her tumbling thoughts when every now and then there was a tug on her long hair.

"Your hair is very shiny and smooth today, Juliet," Nurse said. "There's something different about you today, child. I can't quite put my finger on what it is." Harriet stayed silent as Nurse continued to work on her hair. But after a while, Harriet realised Nurse would almost be finished. She really needed to know more, to try and pre-empt what was coming.

"Nurse," Harriet said in what she hoped was a normal, Juliet-like voice. "Can you tell me what will happen today?"

"Ah, it's hardly surprising that you're nervous, my Lady" Nurse said with a soft smile. *Maybe that is part of the problem*, she thought to herself. "Well. First you will greet some of your guests. They will be here on the

nonce.” Harriet had no idea what a nonce was, but she went with it.

“Then this evening there will be a ball to celebrate your engagement to Paris. It has been rushed, given the haste of your betrothal, but my Lord says an engagement ball we must have. You will retire early, of course, as tomorrow will be a big day and you need to look your best. As God is my witness, we will not let that beautiful wedding dress go to waste.”

Harriet absorbed that information in silence. Married in the morning? She sincerely hoped she was back in Wineglass Bay by then, with her own family and going about her life. But she had no idea how she ended up in what appeared to be 14th century Verona, and even less idea about how to get back home. She had to figure it out. As dire as the situation seemed, the joke was not lost on Harriet. It seemed incredible that she was destined to play out the story of a young woman she considered to be spineless and weak – someone so totally unlike herself that she had no idea how she was going to try to understand her. But she needed to, in order to convince people that she was her. At least until she figured out the best course of action to take.

Although her mind was awash with confusion and nothing quite seemed to align properly, somewhere, deep down, Harriet knew the drawing was the key and she must keep it safe at all costs.

If you liked the first two chapters, you'll love the rest of *Into the Abyss: Vault of Verona*. Head to www.theliteraturefactory.com.au to buy your print copy, or for the full e-book to

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Catch up with the rest of Harriet's journey into medieval Italy before her next adventure to snowy Scotland in 2018!