

I AM— KIT

I AM— WILL

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WILL KIT
I AM SHAKESPEARE! I AM MARLOWE!

(SLAM: abrupt light change, maybe some punked up Elizabethan music, Kit exits, Will goes to the table, maybe shrugging on a jacket. SLAM—lights on Will, no music.)

START

WILL *(to the audience)*

Yeah, that didn't happen. Not to us. It might have though. The tramp of boots in the hall, the door smashing in, the sort of thing that may come as a nasty shock but never as a surprise. It's a police state, after all, totalitarian, rotten through with a secret service sniffing and snapping at its own people; the queen's an old monster, scapegoating Catholics and subversive boogymen to distract the people from dragged-out wars and bad harvests. We've got more spies than there are crimes to spy out and someone has to pay; the nobles have some rights but we don't; we aren't citizens, we're subjects. Subjected to all sorts of let's call it unpleasantness. Poets have big mouths, we all have targets on our backs. But I survive, I get away with it, I get to die in my bed. Not everyone manages that. Didn't you ever wonder how I did?

(Lights up wider. Will at the table writing, consulting the books. He's a youngish man, shabbily dressed. Kit bursts in, the same age, beautifully dressed maybe in black with gold buttons, maybe a little lit up.)

KIT
Starting without me?

WILL
Oh, I'm—I'm just making some notes from Holinshed. Hello, I'm—

KIT
Holinshed? And what's that, Hall?

WILL

Oh, they—they're the most reliable sources, I believe.

KIT

Sources? *Sources*? Are we to take dictation from historians?

WILL

It—it *is* a history play.

KIT

All the more reason to use our imaginations. History may be written by the victors, but *we* know they delegate to the poets.

WILL

Still, I do think—

KIT

Of course we'll use them but mind you, we'll take *all* the liberties or the play will be as long as the wars and nearly as deadly.

WILL

I know that, of course, it's just—

KIT

Ah, that's a good boy then.

WILL

Shall we get started? Lord Strange wants the play as soon / as—

KIT

Ferdy will get it when it's finished and be grateful.

WILL

I *would* like to say, if I may. It's, em, it's an honor to work with you.

KIT

I should say so.

WILL

When Strange suggested we work together, when he said you *offered* to, I couldn't believe it, to be honest. Why should you, the legendary poet of the great *Tamburlaine*, throw your lot in with me—

KIT

The hack writer of a derivative bloodfest?

WILL

Well, I mean, I know it wasn't very—but—

KIT

No but you've pissed Greene right off, what'd he call you, an upstart crow beautified with our feathers? He got you there, ha! But if you've got Greene ruffled there must be something to you. And I've just written three more plays, you can't imagine the cramps, I can use a scribe—half the money for a quarter of the work is what I'm counting on, so you'd better keep those fingers limber. MISTRESS PLUMLEY!

WILL

Oh! What—

KIT

MISTRESS PLUMLEY, A POT OF STRONG ALE IF YOU PLEASE!

WILL

Oh, but we have—

KIT

What ails the hag that she comes not running?

WILL

We've small beer, just there.

KIT

Did I ask for small beer?

WILL

No but—

KIT

Is there anything small or beer-ish about me?

WILL

I wouldn't know but—

KIT

MISTRESS PLUMLEY—

WILL

I told her not to come.

KIT

What?

WILL

We've hired the room for privacy. To, to work. I told her to leave us entirely alone.

KIT

What, all alone? No service? Not one pliant bottle-boy running to and fro?

WILL

Well, we *are* here to—

KIT

To work, right. I see you're familiar with my reputation.

WILL

Lord Strange wants the play up by next month, and sequels if it goes well. Which of course, I mean, no doubt it will—

KIT

All right, all right. What an obedient schoolboy it is.

WILL

I'd like to get paid.

KIT

What, panting after royalties? Haven't you got a patron?

WILL

I don't like to always be begging for money.

KIT

I find I don't have to beg. I render services that are quite promptly rewarded. No, not *that*. Did you think I meant country matters? You would. Get your mind out of the study for a moment and listen. Feckless little Southampton is no sort of patron for a likely lad like you, you need someone who can make use of a quick quill. Poets get around, they see things, they hear things; there are those that find that useful. Or do you think you're above that sort of work.

WILL

You haven't said what sort of work you're talking about.

KIT

If I have to say, you're too stupid for it. My fellow won't pay up for that. Come on, you're no mooncalf, you've got your eyes open.

WILL

Am I—am I being recruited?

KIT

Recruited? Jesu, listen to it preen; don't get above yourself, glover's boy.

WILL

Wasn't your father a shoemaker?

KIT

And yet I was clever enough to get a scholarship to uni, and a good deal more. Whereas you staggered out of the shop into—what was it, oh that's right—*acting*. Your family must be *beside* themselves.

WILL

It's honest work while I—

KIT

Well if you call baited bears and whores honest but I think that may be stretching a point—

WILL

I just want to write.

KIT

Who doesn't, but not enough money in the theater, not nearly, and even if you can write straight poetry—*can* you I wonder—you'll only be hand-to-mouth.

WILL

As opposed to hand-to..? (*gesture of wanking someone off*)

KIT

What scorn! Haven't you heard, we must live by our wits or die with empty bellies.

WILL

Perhaps I'd rather an empty belly than a stuck one.

KIT

What, do you fear a dagger?

WILL

I'm not a fighting man. Nor treacherous.

KIT

Treacherous?

WILL

I fancy the work you're talking of requires disguise. Counterfeiting, equivocation, betrayal.

KIT

And all that's too mucky for our bare-faced Will? No disguises for you? I wonder. Just exactly who you seem, is that it? An open book?

WILL

You don't know me. Could we work, do you think, or is that a radical suggestion?

END

(Pause. A bit of a stand-off. Then:)

KIT

Right, let's divvy the bits. I've read Holinshed too *and* Hall, I've got the gist. Poor old Nashe did Act One already and ghastly as it is we may as well save time and keep it.

WILL

What happened to Nashe, anyway?

KIT

I don't know, the clap probably and too good for him, the hack.

WILL

I thought you were friends.

KIT

Dear friends, that's why I only call him hack.

WILL

Well, Strange won't pay for us to start over but I do think it's too bad.

KIT

Right? *(Mocking:)* "Comets, importing change of times and states!"

WILL

"Brandish your crystal tresses in the sky!"

KIT

"And with them scourge the bad revolting stars"— Bad revolting is right. Well but there it is, we're stuck with it, we'll take it from Act Two. I'll take the Countess, and the Bastard, oh and Plantagenet of course—

WILL

Have I mentioned I'm writing this with you?

KIT

You can have the hero Talbot, he's far too roast beef for me, see what you can make of him.