

Excerpt

Scene 1 – Late morning, Spring

*(Suggested Music from The Festival of Venice: Music for Mandolins and Guitars - Allegro [Gianoncelli]. The music fades as the lights come up to reveal **PORTIA** looking rather depressed. She is in mourning and dressed in a dark but expensive gown. Also on Stage is **GIOVANNI** in the role of a narrator.)*

PORTIA: The will of a living daughter,
Curbed by the will of a dead father.

GIOVANNI: In Belmont is a lady richly left,
Her name is Portia.
Nor is the wide world ignorant of her worth;
For the four winds blow in from every coast
Renowned suitors.

*(**NERISSA** enters, also dressed in mourning.)*

PORTIA: So Nerissa. How many?

NERISSA: Nine proposals, my lady. Counting Bassanio's which came this morning.

PORTIA: Bassanio... Was he the Venetian at Montferrat's party? Not too repulsive.

NERISSA: You liked him. A scholar and a soldier.

PORTIA: Put him in the queue. But. If I have to marry somebody...

NERISSA: You do madam.

PORTIA: ...I could cope with seeing him over a *cornetto* and honey each morning. But then, what are his chances?

NERISSA: Your father's test...

GIOVANNI: The lottery in these three chests
Of gold, silver and lead
Whereof who chooses its meaning chooses you,
Will never be chosen by any

Rightly but one who shall rightly love.

(*GIOVANNI exits.*)

PORTIA: Oh, Papa! What were you thinking? Ratbags everywhere.

NERISSA: He understood this world. He knew, when he was gone, they'd come swarming. Like vultures after a battle. You have had a sheltered upbringing, ma'am.

PORTIA: (*snorts*) Sheltered?

NERISSA: Apart from those years at the University of Bologna... (*Laughs.*) Before they realised you were not a boy.

PORTIA: Great days... The vino... *Lambrusco* and *Albana*... The young students of today, so full of life. Their debates...

NERISSA: One day, ma'am, dressing as a boy will get you into trouble.

PORTIA: (*deep voice*) Nah!

NERISSA: Not something of which to be proud.

PORTIA: Damn, it was fun. All girls should try it. Study Mathematick and Logick. It's where the boys are.

NERISSA: Your father believed you at the Venice Conservatory, studying Musick.

PORTIA: Gabrieli is so yesterday. But Galileo...

NERISSA: Marriage...

PORTIA: I know. I know. This is the sixteenth century. I must be attractive to men. Smile at their little jokes.

NERISSA: You have no shortage of offers.

PORTIA: Arranged marriages are soooo fifteenth century.

NERISSA: He wanted the best for you.

PORTIA: If I'm to have an arranged marriage, then I AM DOING THE ARRANGING. This crazy casket caper...

NERISSA: Each candidate must prove himself worthy... swear an oath. To agree to all terms and conditions, as laid down in the contract.

PORTIA: Fine print. Lawyers!

NERISSA: Select a casket. Unlock it. If it has a scroll instead of your portrait...

PORTIA: He can bugger off. No sex ever again. Ever!

NERISSA: (*miming using a large knife to cut things off*) May as well become a eunuch.

PORTIA: Well put.

NERISSA: If he picks the one that has your portrait, he gets you. And your money. And all the estates and servants.

PORTIA: Bingo.

NERISSA: Including me.

PORTIA: Ah, yes. You have a stake in this too.

NERISSA: My lady, I am like your father. I only want the best for you.

PORTIA: It's an awful lot of happiness or misery, for the rest of your life... to be left to the chance choice of some chump.

NERISSA: The casket maker may be able to help.

PORTIA: He'd better be good.

NERISSA: Giovanni of Venice. Yes, my lady.

PORTIA: Papa liked him.

NERISSA: Indeed. Your father welcomed and trusted his advice. And commissioned him to make the caskets. He's a mechanic. A magician.

PORTIA: I made a promise to Papa...

NERISSA: ...on his death bed...

PORTIA: ... that no one in this house would help a man to choose a casket. But Giovanni is not of this household...

NERISSA: You use the Logick!

PORTIA: There's always a loophole.