Summary

This close to one another—their chests pressed together, their arms intertwined—Horatio could smell Hamlet’s perfume. It was something floral, perhaps jasmine, and Horatio breathed it in deeply. He had missed Hamlet’s presence over the past two months.

(A scene taking place after Hamlet is confronted by his father’s ghost.)

Notes

See the end of the work for notes.

Horatio gripped Hamlet’s shoulders, tucking the younger man under his arm as he guided him towards the castle’s entrance. Their boots crushed the icy snow beneath their feet into fragments, and the January wind bit through their clothes. Horatio gritted his teeth, shivering and clutching onto Hamlet further. The prince made no reaction; his once lively eyes were vacant, his face stony and pallid.

They made their way through the main entrance and were met with the warm hustle of castle activity. Guards dotted the foyer, and servants scuttled about, carrying trays of meat and bundles of firewood. Horatio ushered Hamlet past them, afraid that staying in the public eye any longer than necessary would damn them both. Marcellus had already returned to his post, and Horatio wasn’t eager to explain to any other guards why the sole heir to the throne looked near death.

Horatio could barely explain it to himself. After seeing the former king’s apparition the previous night with just Marcellus and Bernardo, Horatio wanted nothing more than to write it off as a mistake or a dream. But he could not lie, and he certainly couldn’t lie to his prince. He had seen the ghost again quite clearly a half an hour ago. There was no alternative explanation. The apparition was real, and it was Hamlet’s father.
Horatio and Marcellus had found Hamlet crumbled in the snow—head in hands, trembling, cheeks stained with frozen tears. It had nearly broken Horatio to see Hamlet in such a state, but it broke him more to learn that Hamlet did not trust him enough to keep the knowledge of his father’s ghost a secret. Having to swear on a sword was unnecessary, but Hamlet had seemed so frightened, so unlike himself.

However, after Hamlet had called for them to return to the castle, he refused to speak of what had actually transpired between him and his father. Hamlet, not speaking, was cause for serious concern.

Through the halls Horatio and Hamlet continued, tracking melted boot-prints on the smooth, cobbled floors until they finally reached Hamlet’s chambers. Horatio used his free arm to push the oak door open. Inside, the air was warm and rich with the scent of cinnamon—a luxury only a royal could afford, but probably not one Hamlet had requested himself. A fire was already crackling in the hearth, and Horatio gently brought Hamlet to it, settling him on the settee that lay before it. It had been freezing outside, and although Hamlet’s thin frame was adorned with a fur-lined cloak, he continued to shiver, just as he had outside. His ears and nose were red with cold, and his eyelashes and hair were dusted with fresh snow.

Now that they were safe in the castle and away from potential eavesdroppers, Horatio could try and coax Hamlet to serenity. It pained him to see his prince so troubled.

“My lord,” Horatio began quietly, “would you like for me to call for tea?”

A warm drink wasn’t going to solve their problem, but it was certainly a good start. Still, his friend remained silent. Hamlet’s eyes were trained on the dancing flames in front of him.

“Cider, then? I’m sure I can get one of the servants to add some whiskey to it if you would like.”

When Hamlet still did not reply, Horatio sat down next to him. The cushion was plush, clearly expensive, and Horatio was again reminded of their different upbringings. Hamlet: the son of a king. Horatio: the son of a grocer.

“My lord?” Horatio tentatively asked. He was getting more worried by the minute. If Hamlet would only reply to him, even just once, Horatio would be reassured that his friend could be brought back from whatever ledge he was on.

What had his father told him?

Pressing his hand to Hamlet’s shoulder, Horatio tried again. “Hamlet?”

The sound of his name—not a formal title, but his actual name—was enough to bring a teaspoon of life back into his sullen eyes. He blinked a few times, looking first at the stone mantel, then at the tapestries that hugged the walls. Finally, his eyes landed on Horatio.

“Horatio, I—” Hamlet flinched at the sound of his own voice, which had become hoarse with crying.

“Yes?” Horatio asked.

Hamlet took a deep breath. “In truth, my first priority is to remove these freezing garments.”

Horatio nearly cursed, realizing his mistake. “Of course. In the chaos, I had forgotten. I dutifully apologize, my lord.”
Springing up and quickly moving behind the settee, Horatio removed Hamlet’s cloak. The top layer was soaked practically all the way through, and the combination of the water and the rich material made Horatio’s arms feel weighed down. He looked around for a place to hang it, but there was no good place in the room. Perhaps one of the antechambers held an armoire, but Horatio was unwilling to leave Hamlet’s side. Instead, he simply laid the cloak across the back of the settee.

Hamlet turned around a bit, looking up at Horatio. “There is no need to apologize. Not you. Not now.”

“My lord—”

“No.” Hamlet shook his head, leaning down to unbuckle his boots. “Please. No.”

Horatio paused, his hand still resting on the cloak. The gold embroidery against the black cloth seemed like a hoax to him; if spirits walked the earth, even against all scientific odds, what else had academia been incorrect about?

Leaving the thought behind, Horatio nodded. “Of course. Let’s get you out of those soaked breeches then, yes? Perhaps next time—” Horatio put a lilt in his voice, an attempt to lighten the mood— “you won’t be so keen on sitting yourself down in the snow.”

Hamlet chuckled lightly as he took his sword belt off and set it to the side. “I was not ‘keen.’ And, if I may, I would like to remind you of a certain incident earlier this winter at Wittenberg. When the first snow came? Do you remember that?”

Horatio smiled, remembering that evening vividly. He had been busy translating a copy of *Beowulf* for hours in the library when Hamlet—jittery, animated, excited Hamlet—found him and dragged him outside. Horatio had protested at first, but after seeing the sunset reflecting off of the fresh snow, he had to admit that the clean winter air was better than that of the musty library.

However, the specific incident Hamlet was now referring to did not have to do with wintertide beauty. It had all started when Hamlet decided to throw a ball of snow at Horatio’s back; a few minutes later, they were laughing and wrestling on the ground, their clothes soaked and freezing. A professor passing by had begun to reprimand them, but after discovering that it was the Prince of Denmark he was yelling at, he decided to lay the matter to rest.

“As I recall,” Horatio said, returning to the front of the settee and unbuttoning Hamlet’s velvet doublet, “that incident was entirely your fault.”

Hamlet clicked his tongue. “On the contrary, my dear Horatio. It was my duty to get you out of that damned library. Your fingers are going to be permanently stained with ink one day, I am quite sure of it.”

“Are they now?”

“Most certainly.”

“Well—” Horatio slid the doublet off and set it down on top of the cloak— “I’ll keep that in mind next time a professor assigns me work. Perhaps I should tell it directly to his face? ‘I am dearly sorry, Professor, but I am afraid that the Prince of Denmark has banned me from picking up a quill.’ Something of that sort?”

A faint smile was forming on Hamlet’s lips. “Horatio, I believe that is exactly what you should tell him.”
The bastian shirt Hamlet wore was thankfully dry, which comforted Horatio greatly, but his breeches were still drenched with the melted snow.

*Only you, Horatio thought endearingly, could get soaked while wearing a heavy cloak.*

Instead, Horatio said, “I’ll only consider telling him that if you quicken your pace with undressing. I’d hate to explain to the Queen why her son has died of hypothermia.”

At the mention of his mother, Hamlet’s face hardened. Horatio had seen hints of Hamlet’s actual feelings about her earlier that day when they had discussed the wedding and the funeral, but in the presence of Marcellus and Bernardo, the prince had worn a mask of faux-composure. Now, there was nothing to shield his emotions.

“Perhaps it would be best if you did tell her that.” Hamlet’s voice was cold and wispy. “Would she mourn for me, Horatio? Would she weep over her son’s frigid corpse? Or would she rejoice behind closed doors? There is no faith in a woman like her. My funeral one day, a celebration the next—just as with my father’s death. What would they be celebrating, Horatio?”

Hamlet’s tone told Horatio that he wouldn’t have to wait long to find out.

“A womb filled with my replacement!” spat Hamlet. “She will conceive in due time.”

The prince laughed bitterly, standing and attempting to slide off his breeches. In his agitated state, his foot caught on the fabric, and he stumbled. Horatio reached out to catch him, but it was fruitless. Hamlet landed with a wince on his ass; the thick oriental carpet must have done nothing to cushion the fall.

“My lord!” Horatio cried. He reached out to him again, but Hamlet refused his assistance.

Standing with a stagger, Hamlet huffed. “My freedom has been seized. My life has been usurped.”

With this final statement, Hamlet’s shoulders slumped. He did not look like a prince then; he looked broken and lonely and wild. The fact that he was wearing only a long, loose shirt and a pair of dark hose didn’t help his case.

Horatio’s chest ached at the sad sight of him. Two months apart, and Hamlet’s windswept personality was gone.

Horatio immediately stood and reached his arms around Hamlet, who was tense for a moment before letting his body relax. This close to one another—their chests pressed together, their arms intertwined—Horatio could smell Hamlet’s perfume. It was something floral, perhaps jasmine, and Horatio breathed it in deeply. He had missed Hamlet’s presence over the past two months.

Laying his head on Horatio’s shoulder, Hamlet began to cry. Horatio tightened his grip on the other man, bringing his hand to the back of Hamlet’s head to stroke and soothe. Hamlet only cried further.

“My father—he—” Hamlet’s voice broke. “I cannot do it. I must. I must. God—I *must.*”

He continued to repeat the phrase over and over again like a cursed ultimatum. Each new syllable made a sob wrack his body. It was as if he wasn’t even speaking to Horatio at all, but rather to himself.

“You must what, my lord? What must you do?” Horatio asked worriedly.
Hamlet shook his head and looked up at Horatio. “I do not wish for you to be burdened with the truth. You are a good man, Horatio, and you do not deserve this.”

“You do not deserve to go through this alone. I pray you, tell me.”

Horatio would be damned if he could not help his friend. Here, in the firelight, he could see tired shadows flickering under Hamlet’s eyes. The poor prince had probably been sleeping a dismal amount lately, and his encounter with his father would only bring nightmares.

“Hamlet,” Horatio said.

It was the second time that night Horatio had used Hamlet’s name. He did not often act so informally, especially with a person of such high standing, but the prince needed to hear tender words. Referring to Hamlet so casually in public would have been ruinous to Horatio’s already humble social standing, but in private, a slip-up was negligible. Besides, if Horatio could let his guard down around anyone, it was Hamlet. He only hoped he did not let his guard down too much, lest Hamlet begin to suspect Horatio’s true feelings.

“Hamlet,” Horatio repeated. “Tell me, please. Is it something your father told you to do?”

Hamlet absentmindedly—nervously, almost—tapped his fingers against Horatio’s shoulders. “Yes. I must kill my father’s murderer.”

Horatio stilled. “What?”

“I must avenge my father.”

“Your father’s . . . Excuse me. The king was murdered? The messengers who were sent to Wittenberg told us he was killed by a snake.”

“A snake, certainly.” Hamlet’s face twisted in contempt. “My uncle, that venomous serpent.”

Horatio froze as realization dawned on him. “Your uncle?”

“Indeed,” he hissed.

The information swirled around Horatio’s mind, each piece weaving together like one of the intricate tapestries on the walls. “Your uncle murdered his own brother for the crown, and now your father is forcing you to commit regicide?”

Hamlet weakly shrugged. “It is possible that it was not my father’s ghost at all. It could have been the devil in disguise. Claudius could be innocent.”

“But you cannot confirm that.”

“I can try.”

“How?”

Hamlet sighed. He was no longer crying, but his expression of sorrow had turned into one of anxiety. “I do not know, my dear Horatio.”

Horatio searched for words of comfort, but nothing could be said to bandage this bombshell. It was no wonder Hamlet had been so upset before, and no wonder why he had been so insistent upon Horatio and Marcellus swearing themselves to secrecy. If rumors began to spread that Hamlet had spoken with his father, who knows what Claudius’ next actions would be. A man who had killed
once would not be afraid to do it again.

Untangling himself from Horatio’s embrace, Hamlet shuffled to the bed and sat down on its edge.

“I do not know,” he mumbled again.

They remained silent for some time, the crackling fireplace the only source of sound. Having shared a dormitory room with Hamlet for a period of several months, Horatio knew that Hamlet was prone to emotionalism, but this was different. This was not something Horatio could easily fix.

Horatio made his way to the bed and sat down as well, putting an arm around Hamlet’s shoulder.

“I know what you should do,” Horatio said.

Hamlet slowly perked his head up.

“You should sleep.”

The prince looked about to protest before Horatio raised his hand.

“I can tell you have not been sleeping well, my lord. Get some rest, and we will deal with this in the morning.”

“But what if . . .” Hamlet paused, twisting the ring on his finger. He often did that when he was fretful. “What if the ghost returns?”

Horatio considered this for a moment. “If you wish, I can call for Marcellus. A guard by your bed might set your mind at ease.”

“No, no.” Hamlet continued twisting the ring and his eyes danced across the pattern of the toile bedspread. Suddenly, he looked up and gripped Horatio’s arm. “Would you sleep here tonight, Horatio?”

Horatio blinked in surprise. “I . . . Of course, my lord.”

Hamlet visibly relaxed, and the grief in his eyes seemed to disappear. “Thank you.”

“I will call for a servant to prepare the settee for my sleeping arrangements, and once that is finished—”

“What? No, my dear Horatio. I am not exiling you to that dolefully small couch. You will sleep in my bed.” Hamlet hesitated for a moment. “If you wish, of course.”

Horatio opened his mouth to reply: *It is not appropriate, the servants will talk, the settee is not that small. But in the same moment, there was a forbidden liquor dotting his tongue begging to be spoken into existence: I have been wishing for this since the first night in our dormitory.*

Hamlet’s eyes were hopeful, clearly wanted Horatio to agree.

“Yes, my lord,” Horatio yielded.

Hamlet slowly wrapped his arms around Horatio. Horatio closed his eyes and breathed in his floral scent again.

“Thank you,” Hamlet murmured against Horatio’s ear.
His faint breath tickled Horatio’s neck, and Horatio held back a shiver.

“It is my pleasure, my sweet prince.” Horatio leaned back and pressed a gentle kiss onto Hamlet’s forehead, then smiled. “So,” Horatio said after a moment, redirecting the conversation, “we should get you into actual clothes.”

Hamlet looked down as if for the first time realizing he was only wearing a shirt and a pair of hose. A bark of laughter escaped his lips. “I look like a fool.”

“A fool with admirable legs,” Horatio jested.

Hamlet grinned and elbowed Horatio. “My legs are nothing compared to my ass.”

“Just put your nightwear on.” Horatio laughed. He hoped the lighting was bad enough so Hamlet could not see his red cheeks.

Hamlet let out a dramatic sigh before sliding off the bed and tromping over to an ornately carved dresser. “Yes, my lord.”

Horatio smiled and watched as Hamlet ruffled through his things. Despite the sense of impending disaster, Horatio managed to steady his breathing. He was here, and he was with Hamlet. As long as they were together, the Fates could not touch them.

End Notes

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