

A MAN OF HONOR, OR HORATIO'S CONFESSIONS

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EXCERPT

Fortinbras was my only hope for necessary assistance. I had no direct access to any other king, royal, or pocket-gilded noble to sponsor the telling of Hamlet's story beyond Helsingør. Further, I had no purse to afford journeys across the globe.

My breast pounded. I planted myself before Fortinbras, bowed deeply at the waist, then straightened. "Highness, I was Hamlet's closest friend, although I am a commoner. I can tell you why these people are worth saving. I can tell you of schemes and folly, of how this carnage came to be, and how Prince Hamlet, a man of heart who prized loyalty, strove to honor his murdered father."

Margrete leaned closer. Her warm, full bodice lit my senses. She whispered, "Ask that he defend us. Appeal to his vanity."

Indeed, I would help these people. I could convince Fortinbras of their value and influence his commitment to them. After all, my prowess in debate had earned my peers' esteem as Hamlet and I had paired to spar against the best minds at Wittenberg's Leucorea University. Persuasion could be my best weapon against the arrogance of power.

"Your Majesty," I continued, "we praise the hosts of heaven that the Almighty has brought you to us. Cristiern is our enemy and yours as well. He's starved the people of Krogen and the village of Helsingør. Your defense of Krogen would be your first stroke in taking hold of the Kalmar Union from Cristiern. Under your protection, we would no longer suffer."

"What defense do these people deserve?" Fortinbras's face bunched in anger. He bore down upon me. With each step, the links in his mail clicked. "They cheered my father's death when Old Hamlet killed him." Fortinbras pointed at the cart full of bodies. "The Hamlets were murderers, and they had no rights, whether by birth or grant, to this land. Old Hamlet was born a commoner. His wife, Gertrude, a high noble and a thief. They seized the castle Krogen for its sound toll monies, crowned themselves rulers of Helsingør and Zealand's northwest region. Why should I trust their nobles and minions?"

"Well done," Margrete muttered to me.

Under other circumstances I would have enjoyed her sardonic quip, an art I adore.

Margrete opened her quaking hands to Fortinbras. "I beg Your Highness's mercy. We are a loyal people."

Fortinbras's brow scrunched. "Woman, I did not bid you to address me."

Margrete bowed her head and clutched her hands at her middle. “After the death of Polonius, the king’s counselor, as the queen’s principal lady I was the most trusted personage of this court. My purpose is to serve. Please forgive it, Your Majesty.”

Another piercing blast issued from Marcellus’s horn. He declared, “His Excellency, the Ambassador of England.”

A man bedecked in a gold livery collar and black damask robe stepped into the hall. He pushed through the crowd of nobles to stand before the platform. He spoke to Fortinbras in an authoritative lilt. “England fulfilled the order for execution of the criminals Rosenkrantz and Gyldenstierne. Who will deliver to King Henry the respect due His Majesty?”

Steady and reserved, Margrete said to the ambassador, “Dear sir, if the queen were alive, she would tell you that is a lie. I humbly assure you that the Hamlets did not issue that order.” Apparently, Fortinbras’s rebuke had not wilted Margrete’s courage to engage other officials.

The ambassador reached into his overcoat pocket. He withdrew a small packet, unfolded it, and waved it at her. “Signed by Claudius of Denmark, Sovereign of Helsingør.”

The letter he held was one that Hamlet had forged in Claudius’s name, requiring that England execute his devious escorts, Niels Rosenkrantz and Knud Gyldenstierne. Hamlet had told me of it and given me the real order Claudius had written, asking England to kill Hamlet. When I felt for the folded death writ in my pocket, its seams crackled, but that evidence of deceit remained safe.

“Who else would have issued the order?” The ambassador waggled the false letter at us.

“A good question,” said Fortinbras. He leveled his stare like a ready crossbow at me. “You said that you can tell me what occurred here. Do you know something of this matter as well?”

I had to build Hamlet’s stature in Fortinbras’s esteem, to deserve his patronage and reinforce Hamlet’s reputation and honor. A fib trickled from my tongue. “Hamlet had nothing to do with it.”

A shaft of sunlight, from the high windows of Freyja Hall, landed upon the ambassador. He winced and, covering his brow with his hand, stepped closer to Fortinbras. “We care *not* whether the squanderer king, Claudius, or mad Prince Hamlet, or their stable boy ordered the executions. England’s diligence deserves compensation.”

I cringed at the rumor of Hamlet’s madness. “I assure you, Hamlet had no hand in their demise.”

Fortinbras’s eyes narrowed in assessment of me.

I felt Margrete’s pointed stare. I did not look to her. When she leaned close, her citrus scent beguiled me. But then she whispered, “Why are you lying to Fortinbras?”