| ACT IV SCENE 7 |
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| *CLAUDIUS and LAERTES enter.* |
| **CLAUDIUS**  Now you’ve got to acknowledge my innocence and believe I’m your friend, since you’ve heard and understood that the man who killed your father was trying to kill me. |
| **LAERTES**  It looks that way. But tell me why you didn’t take immediate action against his criminal acts, when your own safety and everything else would seem to call for it. |
| **CLAUDIUS**  Oh, for two main reasons which may seem weak to you, but strong to me. The queen, his mother, is devoted to him. And (for better or worse, whichever it is) she is such a part of my life and soul that I can’t live apart from her, any more than a planet can leave its orbit. The other reason why I couldn’t prosecute and arrest Hamlet is that the public loves him. In their affection they overlook all his faults. Like magic, they convert them into virtues, so whatever I said against him would end up hurting me, not him. |
| **LAERTES**  And so I’ve lost my noble father, had my sister driven insane—my sister who once was (if I can praise her for what she once was, not what she is now) the most perfect girl who ever lived. But I’ll get my revenge. |
| **CLAUDIUS**  Don’t you worry about that. You must not think that I’m so lazy and dull that I can be severely threatened and think it’s just a game. You’ll hear more about my plans soon enough. I loved your father, and I love myself, which should be enough to— |
| *A**MESSENGER**enters with letters.* |
| What is it? What’s the news? |
| **MESSENGER**  Letters, my lord, from Hamlet. This one’s for Your Highness, this one for the queen. (*gives* *CLAUDIUS* *letters*) |
| **CLAUDIUS**  From Hamlet? Who delivered them? |
| **MESSENGER**  Sailors, my lord, or so they say. I didn’t see them. Claudio gave them to me, and he got them from the one who delivered them. |
| **CLAUDIUS**  Laertes, I want you to hear what they say. Leave us alone now. |
| *The MESSENGER**exits.* |
| *(reads)*   “High and Mighty one,   You know I’ve been set down naked, you might say, in your kingdom. Tomorrow I’ll beg permission to look into your kingly eyes, at which point I’ll tell you the story (after first apologizing) of how I came back to Denmark so strangely and suddenly.        Hamlet” |
| What does this mean? Has everyone else come back too? Or is it all a lie—and no one has yet returned? |
| **LAERTES**  Do you recognize the handwriting? |
| **CLAUDIUS**  It’s Hamlet’s writing. “Naked,” he says. And in a P.S. he adds, “alone.” Can you help me out with this? |
| **LAERTES**  I have no clue, my lord. But let him come. It warms my weary heart to think I’ll get the chance to look him in the eye and say, “You did this.” |
| **CLAUDIUS**  If that’s how you feel, Laertes—and why shouldn’t you? Will you let me guide and direct you? |
| **LAERTES**  Yes, my lord, as long as you won’t lead me toward peace. |
| **CLAUDIUS**  No, just toward your own peace of mind. If he’s come back to Denmark without plans to continue on his trip, then I’ll trick him into an undertaking, which I’m working out now, that’s sure to kill him. When he dies, no one will be blamed, even his mother will call it an accident. |
| **LAERTES**  My lord, I’ll let you make the decision. I only ask to be in on your plans, the agent of his death. |
| **CLAUDIUS**  That’ll be fine. Since you left, people have been talking about—and within earshot of Hamlet—a certain quality of yours in which, they say, you shine. All your talents and giftsdidn’t arouseas much envy from him as this one quality did, though to me it’s far from your best attribute. |
| **LAERTES**  What quality is that, my lord? |
| **CLAUDIUS**  A trivial little ribbon on the cap of youth—yet an important one, too, since casual clothes suit young people as much as serious business suits and overcoats suit the middle-aged. Two months ago I met a gentleman from Normandy. I’ve fought against the French and have seen how well they ride, but this man was a magician on horseback. It was as if he were part of the horse, so skillful that even having seen him, I can hardly conceive of the tricks he did. |
| **LAERTES**  Hmm, he was from Normandy, you say? |
| **CLAUDIUS**  Yes, from Normandy. |
| **LAERTES**  I bet it was Lamond. |
| **CLAUDIUS**  Yes, that’s the one. |
| **LAERTES**  I know him well. He’s his homeland’s jewel. |
| **CLAUDIUS**  He mentioned you to me, giving you such high marks in fencing that he exclaimed it would be a miracle if someone could match you. French fencers wouldn’t be good enough for you, he said, since they don’t have the right moves or skills. Hamlet was so jealous when he heard Lamond’s report that he talked about nothing else but having you come over and play against him. Now, the point is … |
| **LAERTES**  What’s the point, my lord? |
| **CLAUDIUS**  Laertes, did you love your father? Or is your grief just an illusion—a mere painting of sorrow? |
| **LAERTES**  How could you ask? |
| **CLAUDIUS**  Not that I suspect you didn’t love your father, but I’ve seen it happen that, as the days go by, time dampens the flame of love. The fire of love always burns itself out, and nothingstays theway it began. Even a good thing can grow too big and die from its own excess. We should do what we intend to do right when we intend it, since our intentions are subject to as many weakenings and delays as there are words in the dictionary and accidents in life. And then all our “woulds” and “shoulds” are nothing but hot air. But back to my point: Hamlet’s coming back. What proof will you offer—in action, not just words—that you’re your father’s son? |
| **LAERTES**  I’ll cut Hamlet’s throat in church. |
| **CLAUDIUS**  It’s true, no place—not even a church—should offer refuge to that murderer. Revenge should have no limits. But Laertes, will you do this: stay in your room? When Hamlet comes home he’ll learn you’re here. I’ll have people praise your excellence and put a double coat on the fame the Frenchman gave you. In short, we’ll get you together and place bets on you. Hamlet’s so careless, high-minded, and unsuspecting that he won’t examine the swords beforehand, so you can easily choose one with a sharpened point and in one thrust avenge the death of your father. |
| **LAERTES**  I’ll do it, and I’ll put a little dab of something on my sword as well. From a quack doctor I bought some oil so poisonous that if you dip a knife in it, no medicine in the world can save the person who’s scratched by it. If I even graze his skin slightly, he’s likely to die. |
| **CLAUDIUS**  Let’s think about this, and consider what time and what method will be most appropriate. If our plan were to fail, and people found out about it, it would be better never to have tried it. We should have a backup ready in case the first plan doesn’t work. Let me think. We’ll place bets on you and Hamlet—that’s it! When the two of you have gotten all sweaty and hot—keep him jumping around a lot for that purpose—Hamlet will ask for something to drink. I’ll have a cup ready for him. If by chance he escapes your poisoned sword tip, the drink will kill him. But wait, what’s that sound? |
| *GERTRUDE**enters.* |
| **GERTRUDE**  The bad news just keeps on coming, one disaster after another. Your sister’s drowned, Laertes. |
| **LAERTES**  Drowned? Oh, where? |
| **GERTRUDE**  There’s a willow that leans over the brook, dangling its white leaves over the glassy water. Ophelia made wild wreaths out of those leaves, braiding in crowflowers, thistles, daisies, and the orchises that vulgar shepherds have an obscene name for, but which pure-mindedgirls call“dead men’s fingers.” Climbing into the tree to hang the wreath of weeds on the hanging branches, she and her flowers fell into the gurgling brook. Her clothes spread out wide in the water, and buoyed her up for a while as she sang bits of old hymns, acting like someone who doesn’t realize the danger she’s in, or like someone completely accustomed to danger. But it was only a matter of time before her clothes, heavy with the water they absorbed, pulled the poor thing out of her song, down into the mud at the bottom of the brook. |
| **LAERTES**  So she is drowned. |
| **GERTRUDE**  Drowned, drowned. |
| **LAERTES**  You’ve had too much water already, poor Ophelia, so I won’t shed watery tears for you. But crying is what humans do. We do what’s in our nature, even if we’re ashamed of it. After I stop crying I’ll be through acting like a woman. Good-bye, my lord. I have some fiery words I could speak now, but my foolish tears are drowning them out. |
| *LAERTES exits.* |
| **CLAUDIUS**  Let’s follow him, Gertrude. I worked so hard to calm him down, and now I’m worried he’s getting all excited again. Let’s follow him. |
| *They exit.* |