ACT 5 SCENE 2

*HAMLET and HORATIO enter.*

**HAMLET**

That’s enough about that. Now I’ll tell you the other story about my journey. Do you remember the circumstances?

**HORATIO**

How could I forget, my lord!

**HAMLET**

There was a kind of war in my brain that wouldn’t let me sleep. It was worse than being a captive in chains. Sometimes it’s good to be rash–sometimes it works out well to act impulsively when our careful plans lose steam. This should show us that there’s a God in heaven who’s always guiding us in the right direction, however often we screw up–

**HORATIO**

Well, of course.

**HAMLET**

So I came up from my cabin with my robe tied around me, groped in the dark to find what I was looking for, found it, looked through their packet of papers, and returned to my cabin again. I was bold enough (I guess my fears made me forget my manners) to open the document containing the king’s instructions. And there I found, Horatio, such royal mischief–precisely worded order, sugared with lots of talk about Denmark’s well-being and England’s too, to cut off my head, without even waiting to sharpen the ax.

**HORATIO**

Is it possible?

**​​HAMLET**

(*he shows HORATIO a document*) Here’s the document. Read it in your free time. But do you want to hear what I did then?

| **HORATIO**  Yes, please tell me.  **HAMLET**  So there I was, caught in their evil net. Before I could even start processing the situation, they had started the ball rolling. I sat down and wrote out a new official document with new instructions. I wrote it in a bureaucrat’s neat handwriting. I used to think having nice handwriting was for servants, just like our politicians think, and I had to work hard to overcome that prejudice—but it sure came in handy then. Do you want to know what I wrote?  **HORATIO**  Yes, my lord.  **HAMLET**  A sincere plea from the king, who commands the respect of England, and who hopes that the love between the two countries can flourish, and that peace can join them in friendship—and other fancy mumbo jumbo like that—saying that, once they read this document, without any debate, the ones delivering the letter should be put to death immediately, without giving them time to confess to a priest.  **HORATIO**  But how could you put an official seal on it?  **HAMLET**  Heaven helped me out with that too. I had my father’s signet ring in my pocket, with the royal seal of Denmark on it. I folded up the new document, signed it, sealed it, and put it safely back so that no one noticed any difference. The next day we had our fight at sea, and you know what happened after that.  **HORATIO**  So Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are in for it.  **HAMLET**  Man, they were asking for it. I don’t feel guilty about them at all. They got what they deserved. It’s always dangerous when little people get caught in the crossfire of mighty opponents.  **HORATIO**  What a king Claudius is!  **HAMLET**  Don’t you think it’s my duty now to kill him with this weapon? This man who killed my king, made my mother a whore, took the throne that I hoped for, and set a trap to kill me. Isn’t it completely moral to kill him now with this sword—and an easy conscience? And wouldn’t I be damned if I let this monster live to do more harm?  **HORATIO**  He’ll find out soon what happened in England.  **HAMLET**  Soon enough. But I have the meantime. A human life is hardly long enough to count to one in. But I really feel bad, Horatio, about losing control of myself with Laertes. His situation is very much like my own. I’ll be nice to him. It was just that the showiness of his grief sent me into a fury.  **HORATIO**  Hang on a minute—who are you?  *OSRIC, a young courtier, enters with his hat in his hand.*  **OSRIC**  Welcome back to Denmark, my lord.  **HAMLET**  Thank you kindly, sir. (*speaking so that only HORATIO can hear*) Do you know this insect?  **HORATIO**  (*speaking so that only HAMLET can hear*) No, my lord.  **HAMLET**  (*speaking so that only HORATIO can hear*) You’re lucky, since knowing him is most unpleasant. He owns a lot of good land. Give an animal a lot of money, and he’ll be welcome at the king’s table. He’s a jerk, but he owns a whole lot of dirt, so he’s treated well.  **OSRIC**  My lord, if you have a free moment, I have a message from His Majesty.  **HAMLET**  I’ll hang on every word you say. Put your hat back on, where it belongs: it’s for your head, not for your hands to hold.  **OSRIC**  No thank you, my lord. It’s very hot.  **HAMLET**  No, I’m telling you, it’s very cold, with a northerly wind.  **OSRIC**  It is rather cold, indeed, my lord.  **HAMLET**  And yet I feel it’s very hot and humid, which is bad for my complexion.  **OSRIC**  Yes indeed it is, sir. Very humid, I can’t tell you how humid it is. My lord, His Majesty wanted me to tell you that he’s placed a large bet on you. This is what it’s all about—  **HAMLET**  Please, I beg you—(*he points to OSRIC ’s hat*)  **OSRIC**  No, my lord, I’m comfortable like this, thank you. Sir, there’s someone named Laertes who’s recently come to the court. He’s an absolute gentleman, totally outstanding in so many respects, very easy in society, and displaying all his excellent qualities. If I were to expose my true feelings about him, I’d have to say he’s like a business card for the upper classes—he’s that wonderful. You’ll find that he’s the sum total of what a perfect gentleman should be.  **HAMLET**  Sir, your description of him doesn’t detract from his good qualities, though I know that trying to list them all would make your head spin, and even so you wouldn’t be able to keep up with him. Speaking the very truth of high praise, I can honestly say that I find him to possess a soul of such great importance, and so rare and unique in every respect, that—to speak the absolute truth—he can find an equal only when he gazes into a mirror. Anyone else is just a pale copy of him.  **OSRIC**  You speak absolutely correctly, sir.  **HAMLET**  And what’s the point, sir? Why are we talking about him like this?  **OSRIC**  Sorry, sir?  **HORATIO**  (*speaking so that only HAMLET can hear*) Can’t you talk to him in a different way?  **HAMLET**  *(to OSRIC*) What is the significance of referring to this individual?  **OSRIC**  Laertes, you mean?  **HORATIO**  (*speaking so that only HAMLET can hear*) All his fancy language has run out finally; his pockets are empty.  **HAMLET**  Yes, Laertes, sir.  **OSRIC**  I know you know something—  **HAMLET**  Thanks for the compliment, I’m happy you know that. But in fact it doesn’t say much. I’m sorry, you were saying?  **OSRIC**  I know you know something about how excellent Laertes is—  **HAMLET**  I can’t admit that, since you’d have to compare his excellence to mine. But knowing a person well is a bit like knowing oneself.  **OSRIC**  Excellent in fencing, I mean, sir. His reputation in fencing is unrivaled.  **HAMLET**  What kind of weapon does he use?  **OSRIC**  The rapier and the dagger.  **HAMLET**  Those are only two of his weapons. But, go on.  **OSRIC**  The king has bet six Barbary horses, and he has prepared six French rapiers and daggers with all their accessories. Three of the carriages are very imaginatively designed, and they match the fencing accessories.  **HAMLET**  What do you mean by “carriages”?  **HORATIO**  (*speaking so that only HAMLET can hear*) I knew you’d have to look something up in the dictionary before we were finished.  **OSRIC**  The carriages, sir, are the hangers—where the swords hang.  **HAMLET**  “Carriage” makes it sound like it’s pulling around a cannon. I prefer to call it a “hanger.” But anyway. Six Barbary horses, six French swords with accessories, and three imaginatively designed carriages—sounds like a French bet against the Danish. Why has all this been put on the table?  **OSRIC**  The king, sir, has bet that in a dozen rounds between you and Laertes, he won’t beat you by more than three hits. You could get started immediately if you’ll give me your answer.  **HAMLET**  But what if my answer’s no?  **OSRIC**  I mean, if you’d agree to play against Laertes, sir.  **HAMLET**  Sir, I’m going to go for a walk in the hall here whether the king likes it or not. It’s my exercise time. Bring in the swords, if the king still wants to go through with it and if Laertes is still willing. I’ll have the king win his bet if I can. If not, I’ll only have suffered some embarrassment and a few sword hits.  **OSRIC**  Shall I quote you in those exact words, sir?  **HAMLET**  Just get the point across, however flowery you want to be.  **OSRIC**  My services are at your command.  **HAMLET**  Thank you.  *OSRIC exits.*  It’s a good thing he’s here to recommend himself. No one else would.  **HORATIO**  That crazy bird’s only half-hatched.  **HAMLET**  He used to praise his mother’s nipple before he sucked it. He’s like so many successful people in these trashy times—he’s patched together enough fancy phrases and trendy opinions to carry him along. But blow a little on this bubbly talk, and it’ll burst. There’s no substance here.  *A LORD enters.*  **LORD**  My lord, Osric has told the king about your agreeing to the fencing match. The king wishes to know if you want to play against him right away, or wait awhile.  **HAMLET**  I’ll do whatever the king wants. If he’s ready now, so am I. Otherwise, I’ll do it anytime, as long as I’m able.  **LORD**  The king and queen are coming down with everyone else.  **HAMLET**  Right on cue.  **LORD**  The queen wants you to chat with Laertes—politely—before you begin your match.  *The LORD exits.*  **HAMLET**  She’s full of good advice.  **HORATIO**  You’re going to lose this bet, my lord.  **HAMLET**  I don’t think so. I’ve been practicing fencing constantly since he went off to France. With the handicap they’ve given me, I think I’ll win. But I have a sinking feeling anyway. Oh well.  **HORATIO**  Wait, my lord—  **HAMLET**  I know I’m being foolish, but I have the kind of vague misgiving women often get.  **HORATIO**  If something is telling you not to play, listen to it. I’ll say you’re not feeling well.  **HAMLET**  You’ll do no such thing. I thumb my nose at superstitions. God controls everything—even something as trivial as a sparrow’s death. Everything will work out as it is destined. If something is supposed to happen now, it will. If it’s supposed to happen later, it won’t happen now. What’s important is to be prepared. Since nobody knows anything about what he leaves behind, then what does it mean to leave early? Let it be.  *CLAUDIUS enters with GERTRUDE , LAERTES , OSRIC , lords, and other attendants with trumpets, drums, fencing swords, a table, and pitchers of wine.*  **CLAUDIUS**  Come shake hands with Laertes, Hamlet. *(CLAUDIUS places LAERTES' and HAMLET’s hands together)*  **HAMLET**  *(to LAERTES)* I beg your pardon, sir. I’ve done you wrong. Forgive me as a gentleman. Everyone here knows—and I’m sure you’ve heard—that I’m suffering from a serious mental illness. When I insulted you it was due to insanity. Was Hamlet the one who insulted Laertes? No, not Hamlet. If Hamlet is robbed of his own mind, and insults Laertes when he’s not really himself, then Hamlet’s not guilty of the offense. Who is guilty, then? Hamlet’s mental illness is. And if that’s true, then Hamlet is the victim of his own illness—his illness is his enemy. Sir, with this audience as witness, let me declare that I’m as innocent of premeditated evil against you as I would be if I had happened to shoot an arrow over my house and accidentally hit my brother.  **LAERTES**  My feelings are satisfied—even though what you have done to my father and sister should drive me to revenge. Yet when it comes to my honor, I can’t forgive you so fast. I will accept no apology until experts in matters of honor show me how to make peace with you without staining my own reputation in doing so. Until then I will accept your love as love.  **HAMLET**  I’m grateful for your love. Come on, give us the swords, and we will play this friendly fencing match enthusiastically.  **LAERTES**  Yes, hand me one too.  **HAMLET**  I’m going to make you look sharp, Laertes. I’m so bad at the game that your skill will shine like the brightest star in the darkest night.  **LAERTES**  You’re making fun of me.  **HAMLET**  No, I swear I’m not.  **CLAUDIUS**  Give them the swords, Osric. Hamlet, you know the bet?  **HAMLET**  Yes, my lord, quite well. You’ve bet on the weaker fencer.  **CLAUDIUS**  I’m not worried. I’ve seen both of you fence. But since Laertes is better, we’ve given him a handicap. He’s got to outdo you by three hits to win.  **LAERTES**  This sword’s too heavy. Show me another one.  **HAMLET**  I like this one. Are they all the same length?  **OSRIC**  Yes, my lord.  *HAMLET and LAERTES get ready to fence.*  **CLAUDIUS**  Put the goblets of wine on that table. If Hamlet makes the first or second hit, or gets back at Laertes by making the third hit, then let my soldiers give him a military salute. I’ll drink to Hamlet’s health, and into his goblet I’ll drop a pearl even more costly than those in the crowns of the last four Danish kings. Give me the goblets. And now let the drum and the trumpet play, and the trumpet signal the cannon outside to fire, and let the cannon tell the heavens, and the heavens tell all the earth that the king is drinking now to Hamlet’s health. Come on, let’s begin. Judges, pay close attention.  *Trumpets play.*  **HAMLET**  Come on, sir.  **LAERTES**  Come on, my lord.  *HAMLET and LAERTES fence.*  **HAMLET**  That was one hit.  **LAERTES**  No, it wasn’t.  **HAMLET**  Referee!  **OSRIC**  It was obviously a hit.  **LAERTES**  Well, let’s go on.  **CLAUDIUS**  Give me a goblet.—Hamlet, this pearl’s yours. Here’s to your health.  *Drums and trumpets play, and a gun is fired.*  *CLAUDIUS drops a pearl into a cup.*  Give him the goblet.  **HAMLET**  Let me just finish this round. Set it down awhile. Let’s play.  *HAMLET and LAERTES fence.*  Another hit. What do you say?  **LAERTES**  You got me, I admit it.  **CLAUDIUS**  My son will win.  **GERTRUDE**  He’s flabby and out of breath.—Here, Hamlet, take my handkerchief and wipe your forehead.  The queen drinks to your good luck and happiness, Hamlet. (she lifts the cup with the pearl)  **HAMLET**  Thank you, madam.  **CLAUDIUS**  Gertrude, don’t drink that.  **GERTRUDE**  Excuse me. I’ll drink it if I like. *(she drinks)*  **CLAUDIUS**  *(to himself)* That was the poisoned drink. It’s too late.  **HAMLET**  I’d better not drink now. I’ll drink later.  **GERTRUDE**  Come on, let me wipe your face.  **LAERTES**  *(to CLAUDIUS)* I’ll get him now.  **CLAUDIUS**  I doubt it.  **LAERTES**  *(to himself)* But I almost feel guilty.  **HAMLET**  Get ready for the third hit, Laertes. You’re just playing around. Come on, give me your best shot. I sense you’re treating me like a child.  **LAERTES**  You think so? Come on.  *HAMLET and LAERTES fence.*  **OSRIC**  They’re neck and neck.  **LAERTES**  Take this!  *LAERTES wounds HAMLET. Then in a scuffle they end up with each other’s swords, and HAMLET wounds LAERTES.*  **CLAUDIUS**  Separate them. They’re overdoing it.  **HAMLET**  No, come on, one more time.  *GERTRUDE collapses.*  **OSRIC**  Take care of the queen!  **HORATIO**  Both fencers are bleeding—how do you feel, my lord?  **OSRIC**  How do you feel, Laertes?  **LAERTES**  Like a mouse caught in my own trap, Osric. (he collapses) I’ve been killed by my own evil tricks.  **HAMLET**  How’s the queen?  **CLAUDIUS**  She fainted at the sight of them bleeding.  **GERTRUDE**  No, no, the drink, the drink! Oh, my dear Hamlet! The drink, the drink! I’ve been poisoned. *(she dies)*  **HAMLET**  Oh, what evil! Lock the door.  *OSRIC exits.*  We’ve been betrayed! Find out who did it!  **LAERTES**  I’m the one, Hamlet. Hamlet, you’re dead. No medicine in the world can cure you. You don’t have more than half an hour to live. The treacherous weapon is right in your hand, sharp and dipped in poison. The foul plan backfired on me. Here I lie and will never get up again. Your mother’s been poisoned. I can’t speak anymore. The king, the king’s to blame.  **HAMLET**  The blade poisoned! Then get to work, poison!  *HAMLET wounds CLAUDIUS.*  **ALL**  Treason! Treason!  **CLAUDIUS**  Protect me, my friends. I’ve only been hurt, not killed.  **HAMLET**  Here, you goddamn incest-breeding Danish murderer, drink this. Is your little pearl in there? Follow my mother.  *HAMLET forces CLAUDIUS to drink. CLAUDIUS dies.*  **LAERTES**  He got what he deserved. He mixed that poison himself. Please forgive me as I forgive you, Hamlet. You’re not responsible for my death and my father’s, and I’m not responsible for yours. *(he dies)*  **HAMLET**  God will free you from blame. I’ll follow you to heaven in a minute.—I’m dying, Horatio.—Goodbye, miserable queen.—And all you people watching, pale and trembling, speechless spectators of these acts, I could tell you a thing or two if I had the time (though this cruel officer, Death, doesn’t allow much free time). Let it be.—Horatio, I’m dying. You’re alive. Tell everyone what happened; set the story straight.  **HORATIO**  Not for a second. I’m more like an ancient Roman than a corrupt modern Dane. Some of this liquor’s still left in the goblet. *(he picks up the poisoned cup to drink)*  **HAMLET**  Please, give me that goblet, if you love me. Let go of it! I’ll get it from you, I swear. Oh God, Horatio, what a damaged reputation I’m leaving behind me, as no one knows the truth. If you ever loved me, then please postpone the sweet relief of death awhile, and stay in this harsh world long enough to tell my story.  *A military march is heard from offstage, and a cannon fires.*  What are these warlike noises?  *OSRIC enters.*  **OSRIC**  Young Fortinbras, returning in triumph from Poland, is firing his guns to greet the English ambassadors.  **HAMLET**  Oh, I’m dying, Horatio! This strong poison’s overpowering me. I will not live to hear the news from England. But I bet Fortinbras will win the election to the Danish crown. He’s got my vote as I die. So tell him that, given the recent events here—oh, the rest is silence. Oh, oh, oh, oh. *(he dies)*  **HORATIO**  Now a noble heart is breaking. Good night, sweet prince. May hosts of angels sing you to sleep.—Why are those drums approaching?  *FORTINBRAS and the English AMBASSADOR enter with a drummer and attendants.*  **FORTINBRAS**  What do I see here?  **HORATIO**  What would you like to see? If it’s a tragedy, you’ve come to the right place.  **FORTINBRAS**  These corpses suggest mayhem. Oh, proud Death, what banquet are you preparing that you’ve needed to knock off so many princes at one stroke?  **AMBASSADOR**  This is a horrible sight. Our news arrives from England too late, since the people that should have heard it are dead. We meant to tell the king that his orders have been carried out, and Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are dead. Who will thank us now?  **HORATIO**  (*indicates CLAUDIUS*) Not the king, even if he were still alive to thank you. He never ordered their deaths. But since you’ve come so soon after this bloodbath, you from battles in Poland and you from England, then give your men orders to display these corpses on a high platform, and let me tell the world how all this happened. You’ll hear of violent and unnatural acts, terrible accidents, casual murders, deaths caused by trickery and by threat, and finally murderous plans that backfired on their perpetrators. All this I can explain.  **FORTINBRAS**  Let’s hear about it right away and invite all the noblemen to listen. As for me, I welcome my good luck with sadness. I have some rights to claim this kingdom, and by arriving at this moment I have an opportunity to put them into effect.  **HORATIO**  I also have a few things to say about that, which Hamlet just told me. But let’s get down to business—even though people are in a frenzy of grief—to avoid any further plots and mishaps.  **FORTINBRAS**  Let four captains carry Hamlet like a soldier onto the stage. He would have been a great king if he had had the chance to prove himself. Military music and military rites will speak for his heroic qualities. Pick up the corpses. A sight like this suits a battlefield, but here at court it shows that much went wrong. Go outside and tell the soldiers to fire their guns in honor of Hamlet.  *They exit marching, carrying the bodies. Cannons are fired.* |
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