**ACT I SCENE 2**

*CLAUDIUS, the king of Denmark, enters, along with GERTRUDE the queen, HAMLET, POLONIUS, POLONIUS ’s son LAERTES and daughter OPHELIA, and LORDS who wait on the king.*

**CLAUDIUS**

Although I still have fresh memories of my brother the elder Hamlet’s death, and though it was proper to mourn him throughout our kingdom, life still goes on—I think it’s wise to mourn him while also thinking about my own well being. Therefore, I’ve married my former sister-in-law, the queen, with mixed feelings of happiness and sadness. I know that in marrying Gertrude I’m only doing what all of you have wisely advised all along—for which I thank you. Now, down to business. You all know what’s happening. Young Fortinbras, underestimating my strength or imagining that the death of the king has thrown my country into turmoil, dreams of getting the better of me, and never stops pestering me with demands that I surrender the territory his father lost to the elder Hamlet, my dead brother-in-law. So much for Fortinbras.

*VOLTEMAND and CORNELIUS**enter.*

Now, here’s what needs to be done. I’ve written to Fortinbras’s uncle, the present head of Norway, an old bedridden man who knows next to nothing about his nephew’s plans. I’ve told the uncle to stop those plans, which he has the power to do, since all the troops assembled by young Fortinbras are Norwegian, and thus under the uncle’s control. I’m giving the job of delivering this letter to you, good Cornelius, and you, Voltemand. Your business in Norway will be limited to this task. *(he gives them a paper)* Now good-bye. Show your loyalty by leaving quickly, rather than with elaborate speeches.

**CORNELIUS, VOLTEMAND**

We’ll do our duty to you in that and everything else.

**CLAUDIUS**

I have no doubt you will. Good-bye.

*CORNELIUS and VOLTEMAND**exit*.

And now, Laertes, what do you have to tell me? You have a favor you to ask of me. What is it, Laertes? You’ll never waste your words when talking to the king of Denmark. What could you ever ask for that I wouldn’t give you? Your father and the Danish throne are as close as the mind and the heart, or the hand and the mouth. What would you like, Laertes?

**LAERTES**

My lord, I want your permission to go back to France, which I left to come to Denmark for your coronation. I confess, my thoughts are on France, now that my duty is done. Please, let me go.

**CLAUDIUS**

Do you have your father’s permission? What does Polonius say?

**POLONIUS**

My son has worn me down by asking me so many times. In the end I grudgingly consented. I beg you, let him go.

**CLAUDIUS**

In that case, leave when you like, Laertes, and spend your time however you wish. I hereby grant your request, and hope you have a good time. And now, Hamlet, my nephew and my son—

**HAMLET**

*(speaking so no one else can hear)* Too many family ties there for me.

**CLAUDIUS**

Why are you still so gloomy, with a cloud hanging over you?

**HAMLET**

It’s not true, sir. Your son is out in the sun.

**GERTRUDE**

My dear Hamlet, stop wearing these black clothes, and be friendly to the king. You can’t spend your whole life with your eyes to the ground remembering your noble father. It happens all the time, what lives must die eventually, passing to eternity.

**HAMLET**

Yes, mother, it happens all the time.

**GERTRUDE**

So why does it seem so particular to you?

**HAMLET**

“Seem,” mother? No, it is. I don’t know what you mean by “seem.” Neither my black clothes, my dear mother, nor my heavy sighs, nor my weeping, nor my downcast eyes, nor any other display of grief can show what I really feel. It’s true that all these things “seem” like grief, since a person could use them to fake grief if he wanted to. But I’ve got more real grief inside me that you could ever see on the surface. These clothes are just a hint of it.

**CLAUDIUS**

Hamlet, you are so sweet and such a good son to mourn your father like this. But you have to remember, that your father lost his father, who lost his father before him, and every time, each son has had to mourn his father for a certain period. But overdoing it is just stubborn. It’s not manly. It’s not what God wants, and it betrays a vulnerable heart and an ignorant and weak mind. Since we know that everyone must die sooner or later, why should we take it to heart? You’re committing a crime against heaven, against the dead, and against nature. And it’s irrational, since the truth is that all fathers must die. Please give up this useless mourning of yours and start thinking of me as your new father. Because everyone knows that you are the man closest to this throne, and I love you just as much as any father loves his son. And your plans for going back to Wittenberg are not what I want. I’m asking you now to stay here in my company as the number-one member of my court, my nephew and now my son too.

**GERTRUDE**

Please answer my prayers, Hamlet, and stay with us. Don’t go back to Wittenberg.

**HAMLET**

I’ll obey you as well as I can, ma'am.

**CLAUDIUS**

That’s the right answer—it shows your love. Stay in Denmark like us.—My dear wife, come. Hamlet’s agreeing to stay makes me happy, and every merry toast I’ll drink today will be heard as far as the clouds overhead. My drinking will be echoed in the heavens. Let’s go.

*Trumpets play. Everyone except HAMLET exits.*

**HAMLET**

Ah, I wish my dirty flesh could melt away into a vapor, or that God had not made a law against suicide. Oh God, God! How tired, stale, and pointless life is to me. Damn it! It’s like a garden that no one’s taking care of, and that’s growing wild. Only nasty weeds grow in it now. I can’t believe it’s come to this. My father’s only been dead for two months—no, not even two. Such an excellent king, as superior to my uncle as a god is to a beast, and so loving toward my mother that he kept the wind from blowing too hard on her face. Oh God, do I have to remember that? She would hang on to him, and the more she was with him the more she wanted to be with him; she couldn’t get enough of him. Yet even so, within a month of my father’s death (I don’t even want to think about it. Oh women! You are so weak!), even before she had broken in the shoes she wore to his funeral, crying like crazy— even an animal would have mourned its mate longer than she did!—there she was marrying my uncle, my father’s brother, who’s about as much like my father as I’m like Hercules. Less than a month after my father’s death, even before the tears on her cheeks had dried, she remarried. Oh, so quick to jump into a bed of incest! That’s not good, and no good can come of it either. But my heart must break in silence, since I can’t mention my feelings aloud.

*HORATIO, MARCELLUS, and BARNARDO**enter.*

**HORATIO**

Hello, sir.

**HAMLET**

Nice to see you again, Horatio—that is your name, right?

**HORATIO**

That’s me, sir. Still your respectful servant.

**HAMLET**

Not my servant, but my friend. I’ll change that name for you. But what are you doing so far from Wittenberg, Horatio? — Oh, Marcellus?

**MARCELLUS**

Hello, sir.

**HAMLET**

*(to* MARCELLUS*)* So nice to see you. *(to* BARNARDO*)* Hello, sir. *(to* HORATIO*)* But what are you doing away from Wittenberg, Horatio?

**HORATIO**

I felt like skipping school, sir.

**HAMLET**

I wouldn’t allow your enemies to say that, and I won’t believe it from you. I know you’d never skip school. What are you doing here in Elsinore? I’ll teach you to drink hard by the time you leave.

**HORATIO**

Sir, we came to see your father’s funeral.

**HAMLET**

Please, don’t make fun of me. I think you came to see my mother’s wedding instead.

**HORATIO**

Well, sir, it’s true it came soon after.

**HAMLET**

It was all about saving a few bucks, Horatio. The leftovers from the funeral dinner made a convenient wedding banquet. Oh, I’d rather have met my fiercest enemy in heaven, Horatio, than have lived through that terrible day! My father—I think I see my father.

**HORATIO**

Where, sir?

**HAMLET**

In my imagination, Horatio.

**HORATIO**

I saw him once. He was an admirable king.

**HAMLET**

He was a great human being. He was perfect in everything. I’ll never see the likes of him again.   
**HORATIO**

Sir, I think I saw him last night.

**HAMLET**

Saw who?

**HORATIO**

Your father, sir. The dead king.

**HAMLET**

The king my father?!

**HORATIO**

Don’t get too excited yet, sir. Just listen carefully while I tell you the amazing thing I saw, with these gentlemen as witnesses.

**HAMLET**

For God’s sake, let me hear it.

**HORATIO**

After midnight, for two nights running, these two guards, Marcellus and Barnardo, saw a figure that looked very much like your father, in full armor from head to toe. It just appeared before them and marched past them with slow dignity three times, a staff’s distance from their amazed eyes, while they turned, quaking with fear and too shocked to speak. They told me all about this, so on the third night I agreed to come stand guard with them, to see for myself. It happened again, just as they had described. I knew your father. This ghost looked as much like him as my two hands are like each other.

**HAMLET**

But where did this happen?

**MARCELLUS**

On the platform where we stand guard, sir.

**HAMLET**

Didn’t you talk to it?

**HORATIO**

I did, sir, but it didn’t answer me. It raised its head once as if it was about to speak, but just then the rooster started crowing, and the ghost vanished from sight.

**HAMLET**

That’s very strange.

**HORATIO**

I swear to God it’s true, sir. We thought you ought to know about it.

**HAMLET**

Yes, I should know, but it disturbs me. Are you on duty again tonight?

**MARCELLUS, BARNARDO**

Yes, sir.

**HAMLET**

It was armed, you say?

**MARCELLUS, BARNARDO**

Armed, sir.

**HAMLET**

From head to toe?

**MARCELLUS, BARNARDO**

Yes, from top to bottom, sir.

**HAMLET**

So you couldn’t see his face, then?

**HORATIO**

Oh, yes, we could, sir. He had his helmet visor up.

**HAMLET**

Was he frowning?

**HORATIO**

He looked more sad than angry.

**HAMLET**

Was he pale or flushed and red-faced?

**HORATIO**

Very pale, sir.

**HAMLET**

Did he stare at you?

**HORATIO**

The whole time.

**HAMLET**

I wish I’d been there.   
  
**HORATIO**

You would have been very shocked.

**HAMLET**

I’m sure I would have. Did it stay a long time?

**HORATIO**

About as long as it would take someone to count slowly to a hundred.

**MARCELLUS, BARNARDO**

No, longer than that.

**HORATIO**

Not the time I saw it.

**HAMLET**

His beard was gray, right?

**HORATIO**

It was just like in real life, dark brown with silver whiskers in it.

**HAMLET**

I’ll stand guard with you tonight. Maybe it’ll come again.

**HORATIO**

I bet it will.

**HAMLET**

If it looks like my good father, I’ll speak to it, even if Hell itself opens up and tells me to be quiet. I ask you, if you’ve kept this a secret, keep doing so. Whatever happens tonight, don’t talk about it. I’ll return the favor. So good-bye for now. I’ll see you on the guards' platform between eleven and twelve tonight.

**HORATIO, MARCELLUS, BARNARDO**

We’ll do our duty to you, sir.

**HAMLET**

Give me your love instead, as I give you mine. Good-bye.

*Everyone except HAMLET**exits.*

My father’s ghost—armed! Something’s wrong. I suspect some foul play. I wish the night were here already! Until then, I have to remain calm. Bad deeds will be revealed, no matter how people try to hide them.

***HAMLET*** *exits.*