



A Man of Honor

or HORATIO'S
CONFESSIONS

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This is a work of fiction. Although some characters, dates,
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Whether discommended or commended thou do thy duty.

(or, Act the part which is worthy of you.)

Marcus Aurelius Antoninus, Roman Emperor

The Meditations, Sixth Book, II

Remember withal through how many things

Thou hast already passed, and how many

Thou hast been able to endure;

So that now the legend of thy life is full,

And thy charge is accomplished.

Marcus Aurelius Antoninus, Roman Emperor

The Meditations, Fifth Book, XXV

I.

I cradled Hamlet, my dear friend, so like a brother. He lay, sweat-damp and quaking, across my lap where I sat upon the floor of Krogen Castle's dim Freyja Hall. The blood-speckled shells that were his eyes peered at me. Despite his creeping death tremors, Hamlet was strangely calm. He was resigned—an unnatural demeanor for Hamlet, for madness had lately gripped him—but I, panicking, whisked crimson droplets from his temples.

The sour incense of death, that cruel invader, exuded from the dead surrounding us. Our king, stabbed and poisoned by Hamlet, his nephew. Our queen, Hamlet's mother, poisoned accidentally by a tainted goblet. Hamlet's dueling opponent, Laertes, poisoned by his own sword, which also mortally wounded Hamlet. Two dozen nobles attending to them wailed over the deceased and prayed. The souls of these dead surely burned like kindling for their parts in Hamlet's demise.

I alone tended to Hamlet. I kissed his bristly cheek. "What will come of our plans? Our university for peasant boys... They would have forged a better world. Our good works would have..." My words snagged on a

sob. Hamlet and I, as older students at the age of thirty years, had finally heard our calling, perceived our legacy. How could it all be lost now? I told him, “Now our hope is destroyed, and I can’t save you.”

Hamlet’s gaze wavered. “Help me, Horatio. My soul will be damned if my honor is ruined. Tell all who care to know the full truth about my purpose. Then, perhaps heaven will receive me. But if not, and hell is full, Goddess Freyja—”

“Hamlet, blaspheme will surely damn you.”

“She will bring me to Valhalla.”

“Though we harbor our beloved old beliefs, Hamlet, we must not speak of them. If someone hears you, what priest will absolve your soul? How will I defend you against the Church’s doctrines?”

His gaze fixed upon me. “I will feast with Freyja and Odin’s slain warriors... awaiting the final battle. Horatio, dare to tell the truth. Promise: endure every burden to report my story.”

“You once made me swear not to tell of your schemes. You would make me break that oath to God?”

“I am sorry for that.” Hamlet coughed. I raised his head to help him breathe.

“Enemies of the House of Hamlet will not tolerate your glorification. It would be treason. Cristiern condemned your parents as wicked pretenders. He will hang me for extolling the virtues of your family.”

“I-I know the difficulty I ask... of you. Dare to stand in the open and tell the truth, Horatio.”

I bore Hamlet’s heavy, challenging stare and the too familiar stab of guilt. God’s blood, my every attempt to help him had only tempted calamity and worsened his fate. For my failure, I deserved the horrors of eternal punishment starkly depicted in the religious

manuals. Devils would feed me my disemboweled gut. I looked upward and begged, “Oh, blessed Christ, savior of souls, redeem me. Give me strength.” I hoped for a comforting sign. Above, I saw, past the tapestries and the limp banners of crests with hearts, dogs, and flowering trees, the hall’s timbers. They bowed from the ceiling down to the floor and seemed not like rungs toward heaven or Valhalla, but rather like the overturned hull of a sunken Viking ship.

Not far from my grasp, upon the floor, sat the dark, poisonous cup. Some liquid remained therein. For Hamlet and me, I would do what was best.

“Hamlet, I cannot wage a war against obscurity. I’m not like Wiglaf the Dane, who built, for all to see, the legendary funeral pyre in memory of his friend Beowulf. Rather, I’m like an antique Roman, one of the Horatii, who honored their brotherhood by vowing to die together in battle.”

“No, Horatio,” Hamlet warned. “You must be a Dane, bent on honor through memorial.”

I grasped the tankard.

Hamlet hissed, “Horatio, give me the cup. Now is not the time for sacrifice.”

The world seemed out of balance. My hands shook as I looked into the goblet I held. A tiny pool of glossy, black liquid spun at the bottom. “We learn to love the idea of death. It’s an arranged marriage.” I tilted the rim to my lips.

Hamlet lurched and gripped my hand. “God forbids self-slaughter. If you kill yourself, your damnation is absolute.”

Again, I sensed the nearness of Hades. Boiling. Skinning. Mind-splitting torments.

“And you are no longer my brother.”

That excommunication, I truly could not bear. Heartsick, I surrendered the cup to Hamlet.

The poison raging through Hamlet’s body was claiming him. To speed his death, he swallowed the final ruinous drops.

He lay back, into my lap. Bubbling spittle collected on his lips. “You are the right man to tell my story. Although you are a commoner, you became like a brother to a prince.” A corner of Hamlet’s mouth twitched, a weak grin. Then his breast heaved upward.

Almighty God, do not take him. I held Hamlet’s cold, perspiring hands and prayed. “*Pater noster, qui es in caelis—*”

“Hallowed be thy name.” Hamlet, choking, finished the Lord’s Prayer. He said to me, “One day we will consider the grandest philosophies, you and I. Together we will speak...” His voice faltered. Hamlet’s body rattled as if pinned under a great weight.

My tongue lay dumb, entombed in the trench of my jaw. I felt that, all at once, I was fire at the heart and frost in the flesh.

He whispered, “The rest is silence.”

I saw Hamlet’s lips close on those words that, once spoken, seemed to roll away his body’s burden.

Dazed, I held my friend to my aching breast. “Good night, sweet prince. May flights of angels sing thee to thy rest.” I touched my forehead to his. *First Papa, now Hamlet.* Loneliness, heavy and hollow, sat with me.

How strange it is that a man’s heart can break with such force, yet others do not hear the calamity.

If the old beliefs held true, the Furious Host, that thundering sleigh of death, should have swooped among us to gather the honorable dead,

to collect them so that Freyja and Odin could choose among them for Valhalla. But it did not come.

Hamlet's death was a bad death, so unlike the promise of Pentecost. He should have been properly reposed as he died, clad in robes befitting his high station. One hundred prostrate monks should have prayed the Office of the Dead to herald his good passing. Instead, Hamlet received no extreme unction. His soul was in peril, and I had to be his champion.

Moans and sobs rose in the hall. I looked to my left and saw four young noblemen praying over Laertes. His bulging eyes were like marble. By the platform steps to my right, leading to the thrones, two robed elders pulled a longsword from Claudius's slumped body that still wore Helsingør's crown. Hamlet, never one to make a point lightly, had pinned Claudius to the wooden feet of Old Hamlet's statue. The arms of that memorialized chest-bare warrior, as burly as the guildsmen who carved them, reached upward in praise.

At the hall's opposite side, by the massive arch of the open portal, was the statue of the Virgin. Her stoic demeanor and outstretched arms loomed above the crumpled body of Queen Gertrude. In death her chalk face was vein-streaked and her parted lips gray. The queen's principal lady, Margrete, ministered to the corpse. She tried to press Gertrude's gold-ringed hands into a prayerful posture. To retain that dignified pose, Margrete removed her own cap, allowing her amber hair to fall to her shoulders, to wrap Gertrude's hands together. Margrete cried but her gaze never wavered from her task. Her eyes soft. Jaw firm. Her age not greater than my own, probably. Her elegant silk, her lace-trimmed bodice—she was lovely and noble. Her grace deserved adoration, not judgment for her reputation. Only the most fiendish swine could have forced upon her the ruin that, as gossip told it, had soiled her virtue. Margrete's fallen status

surely offended the Almighty, however it seemed not to have mattered to the queen, who had retained Margrete in her service. Neither, then, would I condemn such a woman. Margrete's care for her dead mistress evidenced, in my estimation, unblemished honor.

The single crack of a cannon startled me. It was the signal of an approaching dignitary. The others, tending to the bodies, moaned. Margrete cried out, "Who now will protect Helsingør from its enemies?"

Were the Hamlets' rivals breaching our gate? Was it Cristiern of Denmark's ruling House of Oldenburg? Old Hamlet's sword and warrior's might had asserted the House of Hamlet's lordship over Helsingør and its northern provinces for four decades. But when Old Hamlet died and his brother, Claudius, who had no reputation as a soldier, took the crown, Cristiern had directed an embargo, less costly to him than battle, to wrest the throne from the Hamlets. From his throne in Copenhagen, Cristiern had starved Helsingør's fortress, Krogen, and its village. He declared he would slay all people loyal to the House of Hamlet. With our royal family now dead, he could overtake and murder us all.

Or was the invader Fortinbras, Prince of Norway? Did Fortinbras come to defy Cristiern, to take Helsingør's throne before Cristiern could claim it? Perhaps also to avenge his father, who Hamlet's father had killed in battle?

A cannon blasted again. I bent over Hamlet to shield his corpse. A woman shrieked, "Cristiern attacks."

The hum and foot beats of a multitude, approaching from the corridor, filled the hall.

"Hide the bodies," Margrete cried out. She rose and gripped Gertrude's body under the arms. "They must not be burned by our foes in retribution. Tear down those tapestries. Let us roll the dead

within so that we may bury them tonight.”

Another woman and a man joined Margrete to drag Gertrude toward a drapery hanging between the wall’s timbered ribs. Six men yanked the tapestry from its hooks. It thudded upon the floor. Margrete pulled Gertrude onto the tapestry and, from her own earlobe, unclipped a gilt-stud earring. She fastened it to Gertrude’s shiny black collar. Margrete kissed Gertrude’s wrapped hands a final time, then stepped back to allow three men to roll Gertrude within the tapestry. So, too, they encased Claudius and Laertes each within a tapestry, and then laid the three cylinders beside a wall and piled a few benches there. To all appearances, it was the debris of a past festivity.

Beyond the corridor, perhaps in the courtyard garden, a trumpet blared. Drums pounded. The nobles clustered by the open arch, and a few stepped into the corridor to scout the cause of the alert. I, however, remained upon the floor and held Hamlet. Some men with Margrete came to take Hamlet from me, but I gripped him tighter. In my sight they melted.

I wiped my eyes and saw the entirety of Krogen’s noblemen and women, more than one hundred souls, enter the hall. They moved stiffly, as if prodded by pikes. They avoided the blood smears upon the floor. I supposed that an army herded them. But only two men, the last to pass through the portal’s round arch, appeared.

One man—perhaps twenty-five years, of average height and girth—wore a breastplate smeared with blackened blood. A sword dangled from a loop that belted leather pantaloons. Upon each ankle rested a bunched sleeve of tarnished mail that jangled with each step. Scars marked his brows and cheeks. His sandy pallor seemed crisped from heat and toil, and his fists were large and rough, dyed by grime. The briny

reek of animal sweat reached me where I sat, clutching Hamlet's corpse, trembling for fear that this was Cristiern. Would he imprison or kill us?

The nobles knelt, heads bowed.

I leaned over Hamlet's corpse and dared to regard the other man. He was not a general, for he sauntered, rather than stomped, into the room. His garb was entirely black except for his white shirt and brown mud marring his strapped boots. From his wide-brimmed hat a dark mane flowed upon his shoulders. His cape, elegant and sleek, shrouded his torso like a raven's folded wings. He stood, broad shoulders rolled back, and calmly regarded us. He noticed the bloody marks upon the floor, where no one stood, and then said to the armored man beside him, "*Mon Dieu*, a riot has occurred."

I recognized by his French accent that did not gutturalize the Rs that he was a Burgundian. Likely older than me by only a few years, his bearing, Roman aquiline nose and face, as if molded by a fine chisel and branded by a slender moustache, was noble. Most compelling about this man was his confidence, which seemed genuine to him, not dependent upon a weapon, for he held none.

The man in armor glared at the prostrate crowd. Clusters of people gripped hands. A few whimpered.

In the corridor outside the hall, one of Krogen's guards, the old Italian, Marcellus, raised a horn and blasted a clarion note. He called out, announcing the armored man who stood before us. "All hail, Fortinbras of Norway."

Not Cristiern. Relief washed over us. Men rose from their knees but remained stooped, bowing. Ladies curtsied low.

Rather than signal that all may rise, Fortinbras opened his arms, then dropped them to his sides as he beheld the empty thrones upon the plat-

form. "Where is Claudius? Lanier, this is no diplomatic arrangement."

Lanier, the Frenchman, sniffed the air and grimaced. He walked among the people toward a bloody patch but paused and stooped to retrieve a scarf dropped by a crying woman. After Lanier placed it into her hand, he proceeded to the grim smear. He bent to touch the sticky blood. Brow ruffled, he glanced across the hall and spied the three rolled tapestries lying against the wall. Lanier's boots knocked the floor in deliberate stride toward the hidden bodies. He pulled away the benches and unrolled one tube. Gertrude slid out and lay upon her side. Her hands rested askew, no longer wrapped as if in supplication.

Margrete bent, clutching her middle as though ill.

Next, Lanier strode to the second roll and yanked upon it. The tube unfurled to expel Laertes facedown, arms and legs outspread.

"No king yet," Lanier said in French-accented Danish, adding some syllables.

Then, Lanier hunched over the third tube and pulled hard upon it. The tapestry unrolled, sending Claudius's body and crown tumbling across the floor in the direction of Fortinbras. Nobles cried out and scattered. Sorrow and the dung stench of fresh death made my belly clench.

Lanier pointed at the pinch-faced corpse. With a dry, sardonic tone, he said, "*Mon seigneur*, I present Claudius, Denmark's king of Helsingør's provinces. He cannot receive you. However, you may receive him." If not for the dire moment, I would have laughed; I liked Lanier's demeanor.

Fortinbras went to the body and stared down at his pale, stiffening rival. A grin of satisfaction spread across his lips. "What bedlam is this?"

Lanier looked to me and Hamlet's cold corpse, which I held close. He approached, and when he crouched beside me the scent of cloves

lingered. His dark, vulpine eyes regarded me. “*Mon ami*, was it this man or the younger dead one?” A full baritone, hardly nasal. His black, leather-gloved hands opened. “*Rendre le corps.*”

I could not release Hamlet to him.

“I will bear him gently.” Lanier’s thumb wiped each wing of his dark mustache. “The body is nothing but a vessel.”

Hamlet must be buried, I thought. Relenting, I lowered Hamlet like an armful of splintered glass to the floor beside me. His face was as white as Helsingør’s sand. As was true of all men of his house, his fair skin was as smooth as a calf’s except near the eyes, which bore the print of age, and his eyes were as blue as Øresund Bay. I touched Hamlet’s cooling forehead and slowly made the sign of the cross upon his brow.

Lanier lifted Hamlet as if taking his own child into his arms and hoisted his limp body across his shoulders. He stood and, turning away from me, staggered slightly beneath the weight.

I reached for Hamlet’s trailing arm, for the debris of my chosen family and future, but my friend was beyond my grasp. He never heard my assurances, because I never answered his request while he lived. Determined, I stood. “I swear, I will not allow the world to forget or malign you.”

Shuffling under his burden, Lanier slowed, then halted. He pivoted slowly to regard me. His brows, beneath the brim of his hat, arched and he nodded slightly to me as if in respect.

I had accepted the deadly charge. The act would be treason against Cristiern, and I would be killed for it if discovered. Worse, a failed promise would dishonor me and bring the same consequence, death, with the additional grant of eternal torture. My oath would forever bind me.

Three noblemen pushed a rattling cart from the corridor into the

hall. They and Lanier lifted the bodies onto the cart and laid them across one another. I shuddered at the sight.

Margrete approached me, her hands clasped at her middle in formality. Her voice was moderate in pitch and tempo. “Your pledge does Hamlet immense honor.” She took my hand. Her fingers were soft and lithe, yet firm. Margrete’s empathy stirred me. Despite her grief, she had reached to comfort others, to assure them. To earn her touch again . . . and for my promise, I would find a way to affirm Hamlet’s reputation. Perhaps I could be a storyteller. A hero needn’t always be a warrior.

Fortinbras opened his arms and roared to the crowd, “Was this a coup? Did these nobles attack their king? Who will tell me what happened in this place?”

An idea sparked. I saw how I could fulfill my promise and survive it, could save my brother whose death I had unwittingly hastened. I would begin by telling Fortinbras Hamlet’s story, then present it to the nobles when I gave Hamlet’s funeral eulogy. If next I could gain Fortinbras’s patronage, I could safely journey south to other lands to tell Hamlet’s story. Then, I could return north and finish my task if Fortinbras battled Cristiern and became monarch of the Kalmar Union—ruler of Denmark, Norway, Sweden, and other lands to the west. Or perhaps, through Fortinbras, I could appeal to those rulers. Their royal and noble families already opposed Cristiern by daring to crown their own kings.

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 cracked, 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?”

“It’ll come to good,” I said but did not explain more. She would never understand my reasons. She had always been a noble, protected since her birth, not a commoner shielded only by her wits.

The ambassador rubbed his hands as if to warm them. He may have intended his slow steps, returning to the channel of bright light, to give Fortinbras time to reconsider. The ambassador asked, “Should I report

to His Majesty, the king of England, that you refuse to pay your predecessor's debt for the favor performed?"

Fortinbras, arms folded, scoffed. "Their agreements do not bind me because they never had the right to rule Helsingør in the first place."

The ambassador's cheek twitched. "England's understanding is that Gertrude was a cousin to Cristiern's father who never battled the House of Hamlet for sovereignty over Helsingør. Further, Gertrude and Old Hamlet created their tribe, residency, and rights to the provincial Danish throne of Helsingør by moving the region's nobility from their lands to live in this castle." The ambassador raised a hand as if saluting the pennants of Krogen's noble families.

Fortinbras clenched the hilt of the sword hanging from his belt. "Norway has rights to Helsingør. Cristiern is not the only Norse royal injured by the Hamlets' usurpation of land and throne. Old Hamlet murdered my father. Today, due to Fortune's blessing, I was passing through this region, returning from battle against the Poles and bound for my home"—Fortinbras slowly walked to the cart of corpses—"when I stopped here to pay Norway's required tribute to the Hamlets. However, instead I found this naked prospect."

The ambassador returned Fortinbras's stare across a gulf of disdain. "You choose to rule Helsingør but ignore its obligations." With a disgusted grunt, the ambassador strode through the crowd toward the hall's arched entryway. Nearly at the threshold, he stopped and turned on his heel. "Prince Fortinbras, although you take Helsingør's throne, it will not strengthen your defenses against Cristiern. Indeed, it will cost you more than you will be able to defend from Norway. *That* crown, your primary inheritance, will never be absolutely yours as long as Denmark rules the Kalmar Union. You will need your friends to defend you, but

you have offended King Henry. Do not bother to request England's service again." The ambassador left the hall.

Fortinbras smirked. He reached into the mass of bodies and, from it, plucked Claudius's crown. He placed the jeweled band well-centered upon his own head. "Let it be recorded that today, the tenth day of June, in the year of our Lord 1513, I claimed reign over Helsingør and its fortress, Krogen Castle. With sad regret, I accept my destiny."

With regret, indeed. For centuries Krogen Castle, sitting upon Helsingør's knob of land jutting into Øresund Bay, collected sound tolls from the sun-blistered hands of passing ship captains. Helsingør would yield Fortinbras a fat treasury.

"My king." A tattered, bruised, and bloody man stumbled into the hall. He carried a crossbow but no quiver of arrows.

"Geirbjorn." Fortinbras hurried to greet the man. "Where are your fellows? What happened?"

"Our men, returning from Poland, landed upon southern Denmark, at the tip near Falster. Our army is destroyed, sire. Cristiern was waiting for us. His bombards were a storm of devils."

Fortinbras blanched. Agape and wide-eyed, he bent and braced his hands against his knees. "My entire force. Lost?"

The scout continued, "Cristiern is marching northbound. He will reach Copenhagen in one week."

"To Helsingør?"

"I don't know, sire." The scout knelt, covered his face, and began to shake.

The nobles moaned. The crowd churned. A buxom woman cried out, "Once they reach Copenhagen, they could be here within one day."

Fortinbras straightened and folded his arms. His clenched jaw

pulsed. “Not one day. Three, perhaps four days, to transport battle carts from Copenhagen.” Then he barked at the nobles, “You have only decrepit Italians and Spaniards as guards. I have not seen one soldier. Why?” Fortinbras flung his hand in the direction of Marcellus, who was leaning against the portal’s stone doorjamb, and jeered at him.

“My good liege,” said a wavering voice. An elder noble wearing a brocade tunic and a stiff square hat warily approached Fortinbras. The noble removed his hat and bowed. “Claudius did not maintain his army as did his brother, Old Hamlet. But Claudius used his treasury for our good, for entertainments to bear up our spirits when the blockade began.”

Turning to the old man, Fortinbras said, “Claudius wagered that Sweden, Denmark, and Norway would clash like giants and destroy one another before they would attack his tiny province. He was a fool.”

Fortinbras passed the nobleman and stormed to Lanier. “You must get me soldiers. These old relics”—he jerked his thumb at Marcellus—“were probably rejected by the Holy Roman Emperor. Not even fit for his Papal Wars. Christ’s bones, Lanier, you are my aide-de-camp. You must get me a horde of mercenaries, or I will terminate your services and return you to France.”

Lanier frowned. He looked to the floor and, fists clenched, said, “Tonight, I will search.”

The elder noble entreated Fortinbras, “Do not abandon us.”

A young woman of tender years, tears dropping down her cheeks, said, “Protect us.”

The people pressed themselves lower to the ground. They groveled and pled.

Margrete slowly approached. Before Fortinbras, she curtsied and

remained stooped. Her persistence amazed me. “Your Excellency, behold your people. We depend wholly upon your care and wisdom. Cristiern’s embargo... months have passed since we last saw the flags of the Hanseatic trade ships. Our guildsmen need the markets and fairs. You can save us.” Her voice’s register was a bit lower now. “We will help to defend our home. We beg you, instruct us, men and women, in how to do battle.”

Fortinbras sucked his teeth.

I could not allow Margrete to suffer Fortinbras’s judgment alone. I knelt beside her, before Fortinbras’s glare, and said, “The lady speaks the truth. While I have resided at Krogen I have seen their resilience and care despite growing hunger because of empty docks.”

A young man called out, “We will fight to keep this place if you will protect us.”

I looked to the tall youth. If his exuberant edge could be filed down, he would be a fine warrior.

Fortinbras’s face, a frown-cleft stone, softened. But then he spat on the ground. “Courtiers do not understand war. They are leeches with stingers, otherwise unreliable.”

Lanier pulled off his gloves and tucked them into his belt. “*Mon seigneur*, we can teach these Helsingør noblemen to fight. I count one hundred fifty in all, but for children. Enough men and women to defend the battlements until reinforcements come... from Sweden... perhaps.”

“What could these nobles learn within a few days?” Fortinbras asked.

Lanier stroked his chin. “Fundamental skills: bow, sword, munitions, murder hole, and bucket defenses.”

“I should trust people loyal to the man who murdered my father?” Fortinbras’s eyes glistened with sadness. “Perhaps they themselves

killed Claudius and the others. The castle and fortress are worth saving and probably the village. But train this soft, weak herd?"

Fortinbras paced the length of the crowd. Grit crackled beneath his boots. He wiped his face with one hand. Then, he turned and regarded us suspiciously. "I will decide after this one"—he pointed at me—"who is not a noble, reports the facts about how the Hamlets were killed." He scowled at me as if I were a worm swimming in his gruel.

"King Fortinbras—" Old Marcellus, hobbling toward us, pointed the narrow end of his horn at me, where I remained kneeling beside Margrete. "Horatio can tell you much, even about how your father died. He saw your father and Old Hamlet on that icy battlefield. Did you not, Horatio?"

I regarded Marcellus and, with a slight swipe of my hand, gestured for silence. True, I had once told him and the Spanish guard, Barnardo, that I had seen that deadly fight. I had said so only to gain their trust. To me, that glorious victory seemed like a memory because Hamlet had related the story to me many times. In fact, however, I had never witnessed Old Hamlet in battle.

A prickly sensation warned me to locate its source. To my immediate left, I saw that Margrete's grim frown and strained eyes were due to more than sorrow's mark or pain from maintaining her curtsy. Her stare was that of a tired magistrate. She whispered, "Horatio, I pray you. Do not lie to Fortinbras. If he discovers any falsehoods, we will be punished."

"Lady, you have little faith in the art of scholars. Ours is neither a black nor white craft, and we deal in a variety of truths."

Margrete's brow bunched. Disapproval seeped from her pressed lips. "How many truths are there from which to choose?"

I felt Marcellus's shaking hand upon my shoulder. "Horatio, tell him." Marcellus then turned to Fortinbras. "Horatio also saw Old Hamlet's ghost—remember, Horatio? You were with us on the ramparts before you told Hamlet of its visitation."

Fortinbras's stare was as cold and sharp as a winter warrior's blade. "Rise, commoner. You saw Old Hamlet's ghost?"

I stood and replied, "I did, Your Highness."

"How did Hamlet manage to conjure his father's spirit?"

"The ghost willed the encounters."

"For years I dreamt of besting Old Hamlet. Instead, circumstance was the victor."

I regarded Fortinbras. *The cherubs of Mars must have wept for you*, I thought.

"Commoner, who besides the dead committed these crimes? Tell me the truth."

"No one, majesty," I said.

"I will execute any who helped Old Hamlet murder my father."

"At Krogen, treachery was aimed inward. It's unlikely that Helsingør's nobles conspired against your father."

Fortinbras's chin raised, and his sharp stare pinioned me. "We will go to the royal suite, immediately, where you will tell me everything. Take me there." He turned toward the hall's pocked archway. Over his shoulder he called out, "Lanier, get me an army of mercenaries." The click of his heels striking the stone-paved corridor bid that I follow.

I hastily bid Margrete good day, then pushed through the crowd and ran out of the hall after Fortinbras. His armor and leather-clad figure strode toward the corner stairway. My feet pounded in exact cadence

with my thundering fear. Would my testimony secure Fortinbras's patronage and his defense of Krogen's people? Or would failure of my promise and honor force me to find more poison and relinquish my soul?



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

J. A. Nelson's passion for exploring connections between history, literature, and evidence in written texts has shaped her life thus far—from a BA (Occidental College) and MA (the George Washington University) in cultural studies to a two-decade career at the National Archives of the United States, working with historical documentary treasures and helping people access unique stories in those records. A native of Los Angeles, Ms. Nelson lives with her husband in Northern Virginia. *A Man of Honor, or Horatio's Confessions* is her debut novel.

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