

The Mask of Madness

By Papagena

Submitted: July 16, 2008

Updated: July 16, 2008

In which Hamlet is afraid and Horatio is a good friend. You could interpret it as slash if you wish, but I don't see it that way. To each his own.

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Veni Scripsi Vici

The Mask of Madness

“Horatio?”

“Ay?”

“Wilt thou stay with me tonight? My mind is ill at ease.”

“Of course.”

They entered Hamlet’s bedchamber. Horatio closed the door as Hamlet removed his doublet and tossed it to the floor. It settled in a crumpled heap of velvet beneath the window.

He proceeded to remove his ring, letting them clatter aimlessly to the smooth wood surface of the bedside table. It was then that he glanced up, seeming to realize that Horatio still stood by the door.

“Sit, I prithee,” he said, walking by and gesturing to a chair by the bed. Horatio moved and sat as Hamlet stopped before the open window, removed his shirt, and dropped it by his doublet. He paused for a moment, his head down, then leaned his forearms on the sill with a heavy sigh.

“My mind is ill at ease, Horatio,” he repeated in a voice so low it almost seemed that he spoke to himself.

“Good prince and dear friend, thou hast told me this often,” Horatio answered in a voice nearly as low.

“Friend, wilt thou not tell me what ails thee so?”

At this, Hamlet turned, leaving one hand on the windowsill. There was a shade of melancholy in his blue eyes that Horatio was not used to seeing. He had seen it too often of late.

“Thou knowest,” Hamlet mumbled softly, almost pitifully, “and thou didst swear to keep thy tongue.” He turned back to the window. “Oh, my mind is ill at ease,” he repeated again.

Horatio rose from his chair. His voice rose as well. “If thou wouldst but tell of what ails thee, I—”

Hamlet again turned from the window. “Wilt thou not let me speak?” His tone, Horatio knew, was intended to be angry. His voice was still so quiet. The shadow was still there in his eyes. It was those tender, wretched eyes that forced Horatio back into his chair. The eyes moved back to the window.

“Tis madness, Horatio. These past days, every morn, I have donned the mask of madness. Every night, I fear I shall not doff it.” He sighed again, running a hand through his golden hair. “Each day, I am able to distinguish less and less between the mask and my own face.” He looked over his shoulder, giving Horatio a mirthless half-smile. The calm about his features vanished abruptly as he turned once more to the window.

With a startled cry, Hamlet reeled back from the window, dropping to the floor. Horatio sprang from the chair and knelt beside him. Hamlet clutched Horatio’s shoulder.

“He comes,” he whispered, his voice trembling. His breath was quick and shallow. His eyes, wide with fear, were fixed on the window.

“I see no one!” Horatio grasped his friend’s arm. He could feel him quivering.

Hamlet’s breathing became even more frantic. He threw out an arm as if to ward off whoever stood before him.

“Nay, back, spirit, back!” he whimpered. There were tears in his voice. “Please, Father, I shall fulfill thy wish!” He kept his arm out, trying to crawl backward to escape the spirit that haunted him. His voice held a terror that gave way to hysteria. “Nay... Nay, Father! Back!”

He suddenly tore his eyes from the window and, with a nearly inhuman scream, threw himself upon Horatio. He buried his face in Horatio’s chest, clutching desperately at the front of his shirt and uttering terrified cries that had become nearly incoherent.

Horatio put his arms around him protectively, holding him tightly. Rocking him a little, he leaned his head on Hamlet’s to whisper in his ear.

“Nay, friend, ‘tis nothing but fantasy. Nothing but fantasy...”

Hamlet’s screams were soon conquered by tears. He sobbed like a child into Horatio’s chest. His grip on Horatio’s shirt had relaxed, leaving his fingers limply curled.

“Hush, good prince, gentle prince,” Horatio murmured. “Weep not, for thou art safe in my arms.” He did his best to calm him, though he was sure that Hamlet could feel his pounding heart. “‘Tis fantasy...” he whispered as Hamlet’s sobs quieted. His voice broke as he said it, and he could not prevent a tear of his own at what his dearest friend had become.

As Hamlet’s body relaxed, Horatio wrapped an arm around his waist and helped him to his feet. He led him to the bed, letting him lie down.

Hamlet turned his eyes up to meet Horatio’s. There was a quiet helplessness on his dazed and tearstained face, and the shadow was there. There in his eyes, and darker than ever. Was this the mask of madness?

“Thou must rest.” Horatio laid a comforting hand on Hamlet’s arm. As he turned to walk away, he felt a hand grip his. He turned to meet Hamlet’s eyes again.

“Thou wilt stay?” The voice was soft, pleading. It was not the voice of Hamlet.

“Ay.” He gently pressed his other hand to Hamlet’s cheek. “Sleep.” He turned and blew out the candle on the bedside table. Hamlet’s eyes closed. Horatio felt the fingers release his hand as he took his few steps and settled into the chair.

Hamlet fell asleep quickly. Horatio could tell when his breathing became steadier. After shifting position in the chair numerous times, Horatio found himself comfortable. The last thing he saw before falling asleep was the form of his friend curled up in the bed.

Broken beauty.

A crumpled heap of velvet.

Finis