This Mortal Coil

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Devoting eight weeks to working on my novel about Ophelia, tentatively titled This Mortal Coil, was a treat and a privilege. The novel follows Ophelia’s life from ages eight to eighteen, when she dies. Such a broad range of time gives me free rein to imagine what her life was like, but also requires emotional and psychological truth in her problems and her thoughts. For eight weeks, I’ve grappled with the nature of these problems, and with finding the secrets that Ophelia herself keeps so well hidden. While I’m far from finishing, I do have a much better understanding both of Ophelia and of what it takes to write a novel.

Chapter One

Death is no longer new to me. Here in his house, I know him better than I ever knew my prince, or my father, or myself. At best he is careless, sweeping in new souls to crowd our brown fields with the back of his hand; at worst he is brutal, taunting us not with hotter fire or sharper aches of hunger but with whispers of our lives. He smiles to see tears, as a child might smile at the games she plays with her dolls. He is never gentle, but as I do not expect gentleness, he can do little to disturb me. One thing I will say for him: he is fair. As long as we obey his rules, we know what to expect – all of us, from my proud king who walks in armor to hide the marks of his death, to the child of two years with plague’s black boils on his neck and leg, to me, bloated and white from the river’s ministrations. I did not make a pretty corpse.

Because there is little he can do to me, he often leaves me to myself. I have time to think now, as much time as I could ever have wished for. What good does it do me? I can change nothing. I can affect nothing for those who still live, and those who are dead shy away from me. I think they see in me what they will not face in themselves. My thoughts chase each other around in my head. I must get them out somehow or go mad again. I must begin to speak.

It is strange, speaking as I wish and of what I want. I am accustomed only to think my words, holding them within me so that they remain my own. I have seen people betrayed by a careless word too many times not to know the value of silence.

But there is silence here, and it poisons, rusting like iron under water. More than this I am forbidden to say. The secrets of Death’s house cannot even be whispered. This is no difficult task
for me. I am good at keeping secrets. But I have been silent long enough, and the words I want to speak will betray nothing of this place, or of those who flit through it hushed and wraithlike with their heads cast down. I do not even know if they can hear what I say, or, if they could, if they would listen. It is for myself I speak, to hold off the poison, and it is of myself that I speak as well, for that is all I know. And I think I must start with my own start, with my father and mother.

I knew my father when he was old in years. In his prime he was the king’s most trusted councilor, but I grew up with the image of him as an old man, his back bent by age and his beard turning from ruddy brown to white. Yet as if to spite the encroaching promise of death, my father moved with a sprightliness more befitting a man of twenty than one of sixty, and he prided himself on his young and beautiful wife, whom he married when she was sixteen and he was nearly three times her age. Her father had been one of the king’s hirdmen, his great warriors, and I can easily imagine my father’s ecstasy at marrying so well. The king made my father lord of the village of Raskvand at the marriage feast and gave him a seat at the table with the other landed men of Denmark. Small wonder that he adored my mother.

My memories of her are more vague, but she was indeed beautiful, slightly built and delicately featured with a thick wealth of dark brown hair. Her hand always rested lightly on my father’s, as though she could not quite bring herself to touch him, but he doted on her and indulged her endlessly. She complained of back pains when I was seven, and my father brought the king’s own engineer to design a pond below her window, so that she might drift in the water whenever it pleased her. He brought a man from Raskvand up to the house and gave him one duty: to keep the pond clean. She did not thank my father, and she never went in the pond unless he was at the king’s court of Elsinore, two days’ journey by sleigh from the house.

I loved her, or at least I thought so then. She was beautiful, and my nurse adored her, and she was my mother and so I had to love her. But she was distant with me, thinking it enough to kiss my forehead and tell me goodnight. She had borne my brother Laertes when she was still sixteen and had thought her duty done; she did not conceive again for seven years. My existence reminded her that she had duties to others, not only to herself, and I do not think she liked being reminded. Certainly she was more than happy to give me to my nurse and see as little of me as she wished.
She died of a summer fever when I was eight. I had not caught it, since I saw her so rarely, but my father took ill as well. They were both confined to separate sickbeds, and when my father rose from his, my mother had been two days dead.

He sent for me on the third day after his recovery. My nurse combed out my hair and tied a black ribbon into it, but she had to send me to my father in a gray dress, for she had not had time to finish sewing a black one. My father rarely dressed in anything but black – the dignity of being the king’s councilor would allow him nothing less – and his eyes narrowed as I came into his study. I should have bowed my head in respect for my dead mother, but instead I looked up and into his eyes. They were cool and remote, although I saw something jump in them as he looked me over. I was only eight, and had not had time to grow into a great beauty, but I had my mother’s small bones and dark hair, and I think he saw something of her in me. It was only a moment, however, and it passed almost before I noticed it. He nodded curtly. “You will do,” he said, and turned away from me.

Cold as my reception had been, I felt colder when he turned his back. I wanted to go to him and take his hand, but he had never concerned himself with me even when my mother lived. With her gone, it was clearer than ever that he wanted no part of me. I left his study as silently as I could.

Laertes had been sent for when my mother fell ill, but he returned from the university in Paris too late to see her buried. He came home to Raskvand in green silk, proud and laughing, and I was entranced. My father was not. Laertes bowed his head under my father’s blazing censure, went to my mother’s solitary grave in the back of the bailey to pay his respects, and then claimed her room as his. That stung both my father and me – my mother’s memory was still bright for my father, and I had wanted Laertes to myself, to tell tales of Paris and to tease me, as I’d heard that brothers were supposed to do. But at last my father gave in to Laertes’ arguments that a man needed a room of his own and could not be expected to share one with a child of eight years, especially when that child was his sister. I was not sure that at fifteen my brother qualified as a man, but he was adamant about it, and that seemed to be enough for my father.

In the first week Laertes was back, I spent more time in his room than I had in all my life when it had been my mother’s. I could not stay away. My brother was handsome and fairly crackling with life, and he made a much better companion than my silent father, who locked himself in his study to grieve in solitude. I had few memories of Laertes – he had gone to Paris at
twelve years old, when I was five – but I could recall him spinning me around and laughing, his hands warm and solid around my waist. His was the only laugh I remembered, and I haunted him in hopes of hearing it again. To his credit, he tolerated me more graciously than others might have. He did not lock me out, and if he nurtured my worship of him, well, he was fifteen, and I cannot find it in myself to blame him.

Once he even invited me in. At the end of that first week of his return, I sat in my room under my nurse’s supervision, attempting to thread her needles for her, but I dropped needles and thread when I heard a knock on the door. It could only be Laertes – my father did not seek me out – and when he opened the door and stepped over the threshold, I left my stool and rushed toward him. He caught me in his arms and bore me out of the room. I heard my nurse make a sound of protest, but Laertes looked over his shoulder and winked at her, and she settled back into her chair. He was clever, my brother, and he knew how to make women love him.

Laertes hurried back to his room, one warning finger over my lips and a sly teasing smile on his own. He hardly needed to take precautions – it was sheep-shearing time and the house was all but deserted – but his signal for silence told me that this was an adventure he had planned for the two of us alone. I was giddy with excitement. Once we entered, he closed the door and set me down. The wooden floor creaked softly under me, and Laertes hushed me. Then he kicked off his boots and pulled his tunic over his head. I blushed and looked away – his fine linen shirt underneath was all but transparent, and I had never seen nakedness before, in man or woman. I knew that his face and arms were tanned, but I had not known until now that all his skin was the color of a young acorn just past its green. I could see the color bloom below his shirt.

He sighed at the look on my face and tugged me over to him. “Don’t be ridiculous, Ophelia,” he said. “Come over here.” He towed me over to the window, which my father had enlarged so that my mother could enjoy her view of her pond and the village spreading out below our house, yellow roofs and yellow fields. The wooden sill was broad enough for a grown man to sit on, and Laertes lifted me onto it. I was still too young to cover my hair, and it blew across my face in the wind, baby-fine and brown. “See that tree?” he asked, pointing with a slender finger.

He hardly needed to point – it could not be missed. My mother had kept it pruned for some years, but lately she had let it grow as it wished. Now the tree loomed up in front of the window, its branches twining over the wooden sill as though trying to pull the dead wood back into the living tree. Its green leaves tickled my face and caught at my loose hair. “I see it,” I said.
Laertes let go of me abruptly and stripped himself of even his linen shirt, so that when I turned, I looked at his bare chest. I stared, and although he had been about to move, he held still and let me look. I had never seen such a thing before. When my father called in workers to dig the pond or enlarge the window, they had kept their shirts on, and I barely looked at myself when I was undressed; my nurse simply removed my clothes as though I was a doll. I put out my hand and touched his belly. When I felt his muscles move beneath my palm, I pulled my hand away.

He laughed and boosted himself onto the sill. “I’m going to teach you a game,” he said. “You’ll have to keep this a secret, Ophelia, but I think this will be fun for you. This is a very fun game – the Greatest Game in Denmark. Now, I’m only going to show you once. Get down from the sill for a moment. I’ll need space.”

I hopped down, glad to have the solid floor under my feet at the same time that I missed the wind blowing my hair into tangles. I turned around in time to see Laertes swing like a breeze into the tree and climb slowly out along one of its branches. My breath came hard at the sight. I seized the rim of the sill and pulled myself back onto it, flattening my hands on either side of the window frame to keep myself upright. My stomach knotted as I looked down on the tree and the sky. I felt insubstantial, as though the slightest puff of air would trip me and send me falling to earth.

“Are you watching?” Laertes called to me. He had reached the end of the branch, where it suspended itself over the pond. “Watch closely now!”

With a yell, he jumped from the branch and splashed loudly into the pond.

I screamed and lurched half a step forward. The world leaned under me, and I had to clutch at the window frame to regain my balance. The ripples on the pond were fading, wiping clean any sign of my brother’s passage. I caught at the branches. Where was Laertes? Why did he not come back?

Then with another splash he surfaced, flinging his wet black hair out of his face and laughing. I gasped and reached out, as though from far above I could touch him and bring him back to safety, but he only laughed harder at my stricken face. “Did I frighten you?” he called, all caution forgotten. I nodded, beyond speech. “Silly goose, there’s nothing to be frightened of! It’s only water!”

Laertes swam easily back to the ground. His fine black breeches clung to his back and legs as he walked over from the pond to the tree and climbed up to where I stood, my back
against the frame of the window. “There’s nothing wrong with it,” Laertes said. “Just jump in. Here, I’ll show you again.” And before I could say anything to stop him, he was rushing along the branch again, and with a whoop that I now recognized as glee, he jumped from the branch and splashed into the water.

The day was warm, and my long petticoats were stifling. I waited for Laertes to reemerge from the water, and when he did, calling to me to try it, I crept out along the sill, grabbing for the nearest tree branch, my breath sharp in my throat.

Laertes was fifteen, and I eight. He had had instructions in logic from the French masters, and had been fencing since he was ten. He knew that he was not going to fall to his death as long as he kept a good grip on the tree, and he had the muscles necessary to make the climb along the branch. I had neither of these, and as soon as I was dangling one-handed from the branch, unreasonable instinct set in. I was convinced in that instant that the branch would crack, that I would plummet with it to the ground and smash my head open on the earth. I screamed and flailed for the branch with my free hand, but my wild swings simply sent me farther from it. Fear dimmed my vision until all I could see was a haze of white and green and blue. From far away I could hear Laertes shouting to me below, but most of the sounds of my world had condensed to my own frightened screams, the creaking of the branch, the swishing of the wind, and the musty smell of bark under my frantic fingers.

In the distance there was a slamming sound, as if a door had opened. Laertes abruptly cut off his shouted advice a moment before my father’s hands closed like iron around my waist. He hauled me over the sill and into the room, and I collapsed, crying, pressing my face against the floor, gasping with relief at his feet. His black robe rustled against my hair, and the skin of my palms throbbed from the rough bark.

“Laertes!” My father shouted from the window. “Get in here at once!”

I did not hear my brother’s answer, and perhaps there was none, for my father angry was not a man to contend with. I raised my face, and then quickly looked down again, for as he turned from the window he was frightening, his face dark with anger. I sat up and calmed my frantic gasps so as not to anger him further.

Laertes pulled himself in through the window. At once he reached for his linen shirt, but my father snatched it out of his hands. “Do you, sir, wish to relate to me the particulars of what has transpired here?”
Bare-chested, red-faced, dripping water from his hair and shoulders, Laertes mumbled a few words about playing with me.

“And this ‘play,’ as you say, necessitates the disrobing of yourself and the terrifying of your sister? Is this your drift, young man?”

“That was not my intention, sir,” said Laertes.

“It was, whatever your intention, the result of your ‘play’!” bellowed my father. “Shameful, sir. Shameful! Clothe yourself!” He flung the linen shirt at Laertes, who pulled it awkwardly over his head.

He turned to me then, his face still stormy. “And you, daughter?” he said. “Had you not the wit to refuse?”

I looked over at Laertes. His eyes were fixed on the planks of the floor. I struggled to find words, but I could not make my mind focus on anything but my stinging hands. I looked up at him and flinched as our eyes met. He was looking at me as though he had never seen me before and wished he had not now. “I am sorry, sir,” I said. “I did not know to refuse.”

For a moment he only looked at me. I felt myself growing smaller under his scrutiny. Then he took my arm and pulled me to my feet. “Come with me then,” he said, “and I will help you to remember for next time.” He released me as he left the room, as if he could not bear to touch me, and he did not look back.

I could not match his swift pace as he led me down two flights of wooden stairs through the kitchen, where he ignored the cook and the kitchen maids and took up a thin switch from a nail on the wall. Not a word was spoken until we reached the open bailey, deserted for the shearing. It had rained the night before, and the ruts from carts and hooves were filled with mud. “I will not have my daughter ignorant of basic propriety,” he said. “But I will not tear your clothes. Bare your back.”

Speechless, I looked up at him. I was utterly bewildered. He had never spoken so many words to me all at once, had never so much as taken my hand, had certainly never stared at me with such stubborn determination. I looked at the switch, at his rigid face, and still did not understand.

“Do as I say!” he thundered, impatient with my silence. I had seen him short-tempered before, but never in all my life had I seen him so angry. I obeyed instantly, turning from him to unlace with clumsy fingers the sides of my dress and slide out of it, to wriggle my narrow arms...
free of the shift and stand motionless, where any passerby coming from the wrong direction would see my chest as I had seen Laertes’. His was lightly colored, I supposed from doing such things as swimming, but mine had never seen sunlight before, and was lily-white.

I heard my father step up behind me, heard the switch hiss through the air, and knew what he was about in the instant before the switch was laid across my back. I shrieked in pain and scrambled away, heedless that my dress flapped open to my waist, but he came after me and struck me with the switch again, bringing me to my knees in the mud of the courtyard. I struggled to my feet, and another blow fell as I did so; I began to run, but he was quicker than me and found me wherever I fled to. At last I sank beneath the switch and sobbed with pain into the mud. He had never beaten me before. He had never taken enough notice of me to beat me, and lying in the clammy mud I wished that he might forget me again, if this was all that came of his attention.

Then he stopped. I did not raise my head. I barely noticed he had stopped. I gasped for breath, trying not to move. My forehead pressed into the mud. “Clothe yourself,” said my father. “Then return to the house.” He was breathing almost as harshly as I was. I heard his heavy footsteps move slowly away from me. A finger of cold wind raced between us.

I lay flat in the mud, my back on fire. He was truly distracted with anger not to have brought me back in, as he always had an eye for appearances. The weather had changed, as it is apt to do in Denmark, from warmth to an early-autumn chill that lashed through my petticoats and raked across my raw back, stingng its way deep into my throat.

I heard more footsteps then, wading through the mud, and I lay still, dreading his return with the switch. When the sounds stopped directly in front of me I knew that hope was lost. He was back, and he would continue to beat me, perhaps until I died –

A voice, the softest voice I had ever heard, said, “Maid, what has happened to you?”

I raised my muddy head. A slim figure of a man near my brother’s age, dressed in brown and red with hair the color of old honey and large blue eyes, held out a hand to me. I began to lift my shoulders from the muck, but I felt the cold air across my naked chest and shook my head wildly.

His eyes darted to my bare shoulders, hardly covered by my hair, and he stepped back, closing his eyes pointedly. I got slowly to my feet. The linen shift scratched the lashes on my back as I pulled it on, and when I reached to lace up my gown, I sucked in my breath and had to
stop for a moment, my eyes squeezed shut until I could breathe easily again. He waited for some
time without making a sound. When I had finished, I looked up at him. “I’m all right now, sir,” I
said.

He opened his eyes and crouched down beside me so that our eyes were level, balancing
on the balls of his feet to avoid getting his breeches muddy. “What is your name?” he asked.

I looked away from him, down at my filthy feet. “Ophelia,” I said.

“Ophelia,” he repeated. “What happened to you?”

His eyes were steady on me, but I could neither meet them nor tell him the truth. My
father had lapsed. He had lost control for a brief time, but it might not happen again if I kept
silent. There was nothing to be gained in telling anyone. “An accident,” I said.

I could feel him lift his gaze from me. “Where is your father?” he asked. “Your mother?
Why have they left you out here?”

“My mother is dead,” I said. My shoes were covered in mud. “My father – my father is
inside.” I did not gesture toward the house – it hurt my back to raise my arm. My shift lay flush
against my skin, stuck in place.

He took my hand, ignoring the mud that coated my palm. The brush of his fingers around
mine was unexpected, and my eyes darted up to his face. He had his head tipped to one side,
considering me. “Then you are Polonius’ daughter,” he said.

I made no reply. He shrugged and started walking back toward the house. As he held my
hand, I had no choice but to follow. The sudden first step jolted its way down my back and
twisted my shift against my skin. The cloth would not come free, and I realized with a shock that
it must be blood that held it in place. I went stiff, but he did not notice. “I am Hamlet,” he said,
and knocked on the door. “Your father is the advisor to my father. I have come to speak with him
about the Norwegian tribute owed us.” I did not understand; indeed I barely heard his words.

One of the kitchen maids opened the door and gasped to see me filthy from the mud of
the bailey. There was no fire laid, not in summer, and I could see nothing in the darkness. The
warm thick smell of baking bread rushed out of the house. “Close that door!” snapped the cook
from the low counter where she kneaded a lump of dough.

The maid stared for a moment longer, as if the words took time to reach her ears. Then
she seized me by the wrist and pulled me in. I did not let go of Hamlet’s hand, and he had to take
two quick steps to avoid sprawling over the threshold of my father’s kitchen. The maid hovered
around me, asking questions so quickly that I could not understand what she said. I shut my eyes and clung to Hamlet and would not let him go. He remained as still as I could have wished, lightly cradling my hand in his, and sent the maid to fetch my nurse.

She came just as the cook opened the door of the stone oven to insert two more pasty loaves. The blast of heat made my nurse wave her hand in front of her face. Her eyes had wrinkled up at the heat, but the lines around them deepened when she saw me. She called me by name and set her wrinkled hands on my shoulders, and I knew she would take me away and give me all the simple care she was capable of. But she would take me from Hamlet. I gripped his hand until my own turned white.

“Come, now,” said my nurse, and she glanced up at him nervously. She was a straightforward woman, and she never knew what to make of my moods. She did care for me, but I unnerved her at times, although she never said as much.

He caught her look and put his free hand over mine, uncurling my fingers. Only at that, at his request, did I let go.

My nurse carried me away, and in the privacy of my cool room eased the shift off my back, pulling carefully where the blood had dried. She filled a copper basin with warm water and scrubbed the mud out of my hair and wiped the blood from my back. I did not cry. I kept my lips tight together and thought of gentle hands and eyes the color of a darkening sky.

Chapter Two

Shortly after that incident, Laertes began leaving the house. My father and I did not know where he went, and he never enlightened us. He kept himself from us even during the rare times when he was in the house. I found his door shut on the morning after the beating, and I thought perhaps it would be better not to try the handle. He did not want to be near either me or my father, and being fifteen and a man he had the freedom to do what he liked. I told myself that I did not mind, but once I swore to stay up until he came home. I dragged my fur cover into the hall and made my bed directly before his door, but my body betrayed me, and when I woke, he was gone again.

I tried his door later that day. He had locked it, but I beat my hands against it until he growled from the other side, “What is it?”
I put my lips against the crack between door and wall. “It’s Ophelia,” I said. “I want to see you.”

Something heavy struck the other side of the door beside my head. He had thrown something at me – perhaps a shoe, perhaps a book. I did not know. I jumped back, shocked. “Go away,” he said. “Leave me alone.”

After that I did not try him again. When he left for Paris, I only knew he was gone because his door hung open for the first time in two weeks.

My father and I avoided each other as well. I think neither of us trusted each other enough to forget what had happened. I could not look at him for fear of doing something wrong and provoking his anger again; he saw in me not only an echo of my mother, who had always been able to throw him off-guard, but also a reminder of his own negligence. It was easier for both of us to drift past each other. For certain I breathed a little easier when he was out of the house and in the court of Elsinore. He was one of the king’s most trusted councilors, so he had reason to be in the castle, but he made the day’s journey on horseback more often than he used to, and his trips there grew longer and longer until he rarely came back to the house at all.

And so of all of us, I was the only one left in that house haunted by ghosts – the ghosts of my irate brother, my distant father, and my dead mother.

There are things I know now that might have served me well when I was eight years old. We who are dead do not leave this house when we choose. Those who leave it for a few moments do so because they must, because something as strong as Death calls to them. I have seen this happen once in all the time that I have been here, and when the man returned, he was bitter, and his eyes burned like frost.

And so I know, now, that it was not a real ghost that haunted my thoughts, and came to haunt my dreams. My mother had nothing left undone behind her, nothing to return for. I believe that she was glad of her release, such as it proved. But I did not understand that then. She hung over my thoughts like a vulture circling for the feast. She was dead, but I still wanted her to take notice of me.

Yet I also imagined that she, who had never spared more than a moment of her day for me, would not like what she saw. How could she, when both my father and my brother turned their backs as well? She was angry, I supposed, and one day she would come and take me with her, wherever she went now. I walked the house in dread that I would round a corner and come
face to face with her as I had seen her last – laid out in cold splendor in her great bed, thin from the fever, with what flesh remained on her face hanging limply from her bones. Her maid had dressed her in her red holiday gown. It looked garishly flushed against the pallor of her skin. My nurse had brought me to pay my respects to her body. I had stopped in the doorway, staring at her. She had looked hot with fever, and I had been certain that I too would have caught it had I taken one more step into the room.

I tried to explain about the ghost to my nurse, but she slapped me. “Your mother was a good woman,” she said angrily. “She does not deserve your ill speech.”

She might not have when she was alive, I thought, but now she was dead and coming for me.

She made her first appearance on my ninth birthday. I was born in the third month, the month of uncertainty, the month that does not know whether it is winter or spring, and now it seems only fitting that it was then that she should appear. Our cook had made me a small pastry to celebrate, flaky and golden with butter, and my nurse had spent her free hours sewing me a new dress out of the most lovely cloth I had ever seen, soft and light and yellow. It was the closest I had ever had to a woman’s gown, with its double skirt and scooped neckline, and I held it to me and twirled until I could neither breathe nor see.

That night I dreamed that I was in my room, trying on my new dress. I stood in my shift, with my old dress in a puddle of cloth at my feet, and I heard a footstep outside my door. “What is it?” I asked, bolder in the dream than I would have been when awake. There was no answer, nothing but another footfall. I was half into the dress. I backed up against the wall, pulling the front of my gown over my shift. A pocket of air pressed down on my lungs, and the skin at the joining of my neck and back tingled as though someone had laid a finger on it.

She had as little need of footsteps as she had of breath, but she chose to have them because she knew they would frighten me. The wall was cold on my neck and arms. I thought of the heat that had lingered in her body, still, even after death.

The door swung open on its hinges. I shut my eyes at once, but the image of her hung before my eyes – gaunt, her hair damp and tangled, her eye sockets hollow and her eyes relentlessly open and unseeing – and I screamed.

A moment later I heard my nurse’s voice. “Young miss, what happened?” she cried. “Are you hurt?”
I opened my eyes.

A dream, I told myself. It was a dream. But my nurse stood precisely where I had dreamed the ghost. I could not look at her. My breath rasped in my ears, uneven and harsh.

My nurse hovered on the threshold for a moment before she came in and knelt beside my bed. Her broad hand on my shoulder made me start. “No need to be afraid,” she said, but her voice trembled a little, and she looked at me in wary confusion, as though I might at any moment shatter into a hundred shards. I closed my eyes and wrapped my shaking arms around my chest. I buried my cheek into my pillow. The air was heavy with our breath, hers and mine, sour with fear. She tried to put her arms around me, but I shrank away at the touch. I must have frightened her. I frightened myself. And that fear must have conquered her affection for me, for she did not try to touch me again.

I tucked myself into a ball and rocked back and forth until my heart was beating calmly, and when I looked up, my nurse had gone.

She spoke to the other servants, of course, the kitchen maids and the men who lit the fires in our rooms, and it was she who told them that I had turned fey and wild. I do not think she did it out of malice. She was a country woman, plucked from Raskvand after her infant’s death to nurse the daughter that my mother had not wanted, and although she was not unkind, she did not understand my strange behavior. She asked for advice, but it seemed that the advice she got was to leave me to myself, for she began sleeping outside my door rather than in my room, and she rarely sought my company, preferring to hand me some practice needlework or send me out to play in the kitchen garden in the back of the bailey. The rest of the servants looked at me as though I were a half-tamed wolf made to play dog. I mourned the loss of my nurse’s affection, and I stayed away from the servants so I would not have to be reminded of their mistrust and dislike of me.

The brief glimpse I had dreamed of the ghost would not leave my mind. She hovered in view every time I closed my eyes, until I could sleep only when I had some light. I kept some short fat candles in my room, already half-burned down and thick with wax drips. They were kitchen candles, and they left my fingers and my room smelling sharply of pig fat, but I could not sleep unless one of them was lit and placed near my face. I did not think the ghost would make only one attempt. She had seen me, but she had not yet dealt out the punishment for my failings.
I had the dream of my birthday again, only a week later. The ghost came in without even the warning of footsteps outside my door. I did not notice her until she laid her fingers along my neck, sticky with fever and more bone than flesh. I heard the ghost’s voice whispering my name, and at that I did scream, for its voice was almost exactly like my mother’s, but it was hollow and quivered with echoes of other voices, deeper, lower voices, as though all the dead of all the world spoke in that one voice.

At the sound of my scream I sat up in bed, awake, gasping for breath and dirty with sweat. My candle had died in a puddle of hard yellow wax on the table by my bed.

But after that, the ghost lay quiet for a long time, and a few short weeks before my tenth birthday I had almost started to believe that she was truly gone. My father came home on one of his rare visits, and I surprised both of us by coming out to meet his sleigh as it rode up the hill on which the house sat. He looked at me as though he did not know what to do with me, but he did not shun me either, and I took it as a good sign. I was only nine years old, and I wanted a parent. And surely, I thought, the ghost would not dare come to me when I could go to my father.

That night I sat up in bed and knew that the ghost was in the house – but nowhere near me. She would not come to the servants. She had no quarrel with them. But if not me, who else was in the house to merit her hate?

And then I knew.

I threw off my fur cover, and clad only in my shift I ran up the stairs, looking for my father. In the dark it was not easy to find the turns and doors that led to his room. I knew when I was near him by the presence of the ghost – it swelled through the hall, swirling with heat and anger. It hung thickly about me, coating my throat with the greasy smell of burning skin and metal stained with sweat. I had only to follow it to the door of my father’s room. I banged it open. He was sleeping, peaceful in the dark, as the ghost leaned over him and keened in its echoing voice, reaching for him with pale hands that moved like smoke in the shadows.

I leaped at the ghost. She was thin and bony under my hands, but the heat that whirled around her felt like a blow to my entire body. She shook me off, but I launched myself at her again. In the darkness it was easy to mistake her for a shadow. She lashed out at me, her fingertips hard and stinging like the fall of a whip. I could not get a good hold on her – her arms and shoulders slipped out of my fingers like snow.
And then someone grabbed hold of me and hauled me into the air – someone living, for the hand on my arm was cold. “What are you doing?” my father demanded. “Ophelia!” He held a candle in his other hand. My eyes stung and watered in the sudden light. His cap was askew, its strings dangling loose. He set me down, although he kept one hand on my arm. The room was no longer stifling, and my breath came in harsh pants. The ghost had gone.

But he must have seen it reaching for him, I thought, seen it striking me. It had been his candle that had driven it away. “The ghost, Father. The ghost! Did you not see it?”

He looked at me as though he was afraid of me, and took his hand from my arm. “I woke up,” he said, “and you were screaming and clawing at the air as though some enemy was in front of you. Yet your eyes were tight shut, and you had the appearance of sleep.”

I stared at him. I felt my left side throb with pain where she had struck me. “The ghost was here,” I said. “She was reaching for you, and I saved you–”

“You were asleep!” He leaned down and shook my shoulder roughly, as if to wake me, but I made no resistance. He released me and took a step away from me. The candle threw thick shadows under his eyes and around his mouth. I could not see his face clearly. “You slept,” he said, “and yet you walked in sleep. You have been asleep until the light shone in your eyes!”

It had felt so real, as real as this moment, with the stabbing light of the candle in my eyes and his heavy, frightened breathing a match for my own. But he had seen nothing.

He set the candle on the table beside his bed and sat down on top of his cover, with his back to me and his shoulders hunched. “Go back to your room,” he said.

“I am sorry,” I said. I had done something wrong again, and I began to wish I had not mentioned the ghost to him. “Father, could I not stay–”

“Go!” he snapped. “Leave me. Go.”

There was no ghost. She was a shadow in an eight-year-old girl’s frightened mind. But she came between us regardless, driving my father and me away from each other until I think that in Death’s house she must have looked out at us and laughed.

The next day my father told me abruptly that I would be going to the court with him. He did not look me in the eyes when he made his announcement. It was plain that he did not want me to continue as I was, running around the house in my sleep. I was not sorry to leave the house – I had few good memories of it, and I hoped that the ghost would not be able to find me once I left her territory – but neither was I pleased to make the journey with my father, who turned his
back on me so he would not have to meet my eyes. But I went with him to Elsinore the following week, and if Laertes returned from Paris, he found the house entirely his.

Denmark is one of the colder climates, but in my early years at court I would not have believed it. The castle, perched on a high rock overlooking the sea, was built of red stone and shone fiercely in sunlight like a fire. Its high halls rang with laughter and glowed golden in the light of its torches, and the rushes on the floor always had the sweet damp smell of the field on them. The courtiers dressed in brightly dyed silks and woolens that sparkled in my eyes like jewels – a blue tunic the color of a cloudless sky, a yellow gown that glistened like a buttercup, berry-red leather shoes, the golden browns of fur robes, even a rare flash of expensive purple in a woman’s girdle or the lining of a man’s surcoat. The queen wore gowns with trailing fur-lined sleeves and skirts hemmed in gold thread, the king was aging but handsome, and the perpetual smiles warmed me. There was no coldness in the air, at least not to the mind of a bedazzled girl. And it was at the court, almost two years after our first encounter, that I saw Hamlet again.

My father brought me with him before the king and queen two days after our arrival, when he had settled us both into his quarters, putting aside the smaller of his two rooms to be mine. I wore my best dress for my formal introduction to the king and queen, the one that my nurse had made for me, and wove ribbons in my dark hair and put on my slippers embroidered with white roses. Still I felt ugly next to the flaxen-haired queen, with her blue eyes and boldly beautiful face and rich gown of heavy damask, green as a forest in shadow. I idolized her and her husband after only two days at their court, but I was sure they would take no notice of me. My legs trembled so badly that I could barely manage a curtsey. But the queen smiled at me as I made my bow. That unlooked-for smile all but stopped my breath, and I froze in place. My father said, “Gracious Majesties, may I present to you my daughter Ophelia?”

“You may indeed,” said the king. I looked over at him. He did not smile, but his tone was gentle enough. “Rise, maid, and be welcome to Elsinore.”

“Truly a charming child,” said the queen. “She will be a beauty, unless I miss my guess. How old are you, Ophelia?”

“Nine.” I stared up in wonder at her smiling face. “I’ll be ten in a week.”

She nodded. “The happiest of birthdays to you, then, child.”

A nudge from my father warned me that my audience was over, and I turned and left the hall. Once the heavy oaken door shut behind me, however, I stopped with a sudden, frightening
realization. I did not know the castle. I had no idea how to return to my father’s apartments. My father might speak with the king and queen for a few minutes or for an hour, and I would be trapped in the hall for however long he might take.

And then a familiar voice, heard only once but never, never forgotten, said, “Maid, what has happened to you?”

I turned around slowly, wondering if it could truly be him. I recognized him instantly, for when I looked at him two years dropped away, and I was eight years old and lying in a muddy bailey. He was perhaps a little shorter – or was I a little taller? – but he looked exactly as he had then. I remembered how he had spoken of my father as his father’s advisor, and I could see in his features traces of the king and queen – the king’s heavy brows, the queen’s perfect chin. And I remembered his name. I had never forgotten it. “My lord Hamlet,” I said. I sank into the same curtsey I had given his parents.

He shook his head and pulled me upright. “I remember you now,” he said. “Polonius’ daughter. What is your name?”

“Ophelia,” I said.

“How have you come here?”

“My father brought me,” I said. I did not add, “because I dream of my mother’s ghost.” If I did, he would think me fey and run from me. I remembered my nurse and my father, remembered the fear in their eyes, and I did not think I could face that from him.

He offered me his hand. “Shall I take you back to your room?”

“Thank you.” I slid my hand timidly into his. His fingers were chilly, but I wrapped mine around them to make them warm, and he smiled down at me. “I still do not know the way around the castle,” I confided as we set off, trying to match his long strides with my small legs.

Hamlet laughed. “I am hardly better,” he said. “I have been away from Elsinore for so long that I have forgotten most of the halls. But don’t worry, little Ophelia,” he said, and tapped his thumb over my fingers. “I can still take you back to your room. I have not lost that much.”

“Where have you been?” I asked him, catching up my overskirt in my free hand so that I could keep pace with him.

“In Wittenberg,” said Hamlet, “studying at the university.”

“Like my brother Laertes,” I said. “He studies at the university in Paris. Is it farther to Paris than to Wittenberg?”
“It is,” he said. “Would you have your brother closer to you?”

I said nothing, but only nodded. He looked down at my silence, and saw that I was struggling to keep up. “We cannot have this,” he said. “You must not run and exert yourself.” He let go of my hand, and with no warning caught me up in his arms. No one had ever carried me before save my nurse, and she was a woman. He cradled me against his soft wool tunic, with one arm around my shoulders and the other under my knees, and I thought of Laertes taking off his shirt, of the warm brown skin of Laertes’ chest. But this time it was different, for Hamlet was not my brother.

I could feel every muscle in his chest shift as he walked. I could feel all ten of his fingers along my shoulder and knee. His words reverberated in his chest and through into mine. I had never been so close to a person before, unless it was my mother before I was born, and never in all my life so close to a man. I lay still in his arms and took calm breaths until my neck and legs loosened.

“How long are you to stay at court?” he asked.

“I have lived all my life at my father’s house,” I said. “He may send me back there.”

“And do you wish to return to your father’s house?” asked Hamlet. He always spoke softly in those years, the early years. It won him my trust, for it made him different from all the others in Elsinore, and I could not imagine that so gentle a voice could ever lift in anger. It was not until later that he began to rage and storm until I thought I scarcely knew him.

“I never want to go back there in all my life!” I said, without thinking. Still I did not speak of my mother’s ghost.

“Then you will not,” he promised. “I will see to it.”

We had reached my father’s rooms, and Hamlet bent down and set me on my feet. As I slid out of his arms, the fingers of his left hand slipped up from my shoulders into my hair, which hung down around my shoulders, and caught there, while the fingers of his right hand moved along my leg as I slid down them. We both glanced away. “Hold, Ophelia,” he said, without meeting my eyes. “My fingers are caught in your hair.”

His thumbnail grazed the back of my neck as he moved to free his hand. I could not raise my own eyes. I thought that if I looked up at him I would simply vanish, like a candle flame pinched into darkness. Finally he untangled my hair and stepped back. I curtseyed. “Thank you, my lord,” I said, and then I fled through the door into my father’s smallest room and onto the
little bed that was mine. I lay there on my stomach with the sunlight bright and hazy on the stones of the wall, and I shook with all the new emotions that I had no names for.