

THE WALLS OF ELSINORE
by Richard S. Crawford

It's a good thing the medieval Danes were so gullible. Tell them you're a ghost, and they'd give you run of the castle.

I arrived outside the walls of Elsinore on a dark and stormy night. The sky overhead hung low with heavy clouds, brought to a faint glow by the full moon which lingered behind them. Rain poured onto my poor knapsack, which I knew wasn't waterproof at all.

I opened the knapsack and took out the parts of the disguise that the ChronoCorps had given me. The burlap sack to clothe myself in. The talc to pour on myself and rub into my skin. The idea was for me to look like a ghost, raise some ruckus, and set the Canon back to right. So I draped myself with the burlap sack and covered myself with the talc, then scabbled fiercely through the mud and rocks to the top of the papet. Once I got up there, though, I simply walked up to a pair of dopey looking soldiers who were leaning against the wall, gossiping.

I coughed.

They both leaped to full attention and pointed their halberds at me. "Who goes?" cried the one on the left.

I said nothing, just gave them an enigmatic stare.

"By the heavens!" said the one on the right. "It is a ghost!" The one on the left crossed himself. The two of them ran off, shrieking.

"Huh," I said. It had been almost anticlimactic. And annoying. I wasn't supposed to just be any ghost, I was supposed to be the ghost of the king himself. Ah well. All I could do was hope that the soldiers would report back to the Prince that his dead father's ghost had shown up, and get the message that he was supposed to focus all his energies on avenging the death, rather than running the country.

I waited, hoping that the Prince himself would show up so that I could give him the message in person.

###

Working at the ChronoCorps was not nearly as exciting as I'd thought it would be when I signed up. I thought I'd have grand fun being sent up and down the time streams, wiping out paradoxes left and right and generally making sure no one decides they're going to kill Hitler or anything else that would completely undo history and break the canon.

Instead, it was mostly paperwork.

The amount of red tape involved in the ChronoCorps shocked and saddened me. The archives were lined with thousands upon thousands of history books. Most of them contradict each other, but that's just the nature of historical documents; even the best historians would sometimes come to the wrong conclusion, and it's been said around the office that if you put two historians in the same room you'd get three different opinions. But some of the books represented

genuinely different timelines which had to be resolved, and taking care of them was just a pain. Most of the time, resolving the alternate timelines with the canon involved tracking down the discrepancy and filling out official forms indicating what needed to be done to fix things up. And doing that meant becoming intimately familiar with the hundreds of thousands of books that made up the official canon.

The books of the ChronoCorps's official canon of human history itself were kept in a special paradox-free room. Reading through them and comparing them with the thousands of history books to find gross or subtle differences was the more boring than I could have ever imagined.

But every now and then an agent gets to go out on a field trip, since there are some deviations that can't be resolved with a few minor tweaks to the timeline that can be done from the lab. This is why I was covered in talc and burlap and water, waiting to meet up with Hamlet. The Danish Golden Age that Hamlet II had ushered in violated too many tenets of the Canon so I had been sent back to stop him. The best thing to do the Bureau reckoned, was just to make sure Hamlet II would never become king.

So that's what I was doing in medieval Denmark: stopping Hamlet II from ushering in Denmark's Golden Age.

###

The next night, the weather was pretty much the same, though at least it wasn't raining by the time the guards returned to their post. I was waiting for them, once again draped in the burlap, and covered in a fresh coating of talc. I kept my eyes wide open and my jaw slightly

dropped. In other words, I did my best to look as eerily spooky as I could.

"Who goes?" shouted the first guard as soon as he saw me.

I sighed. Same as the night before. Trying not to sound annoyed, I moaned as low as I could while still remaining legible, "It is I, King Hamlet of Denmark. Wooooooo!"

The guards both cried out in terror and ran off.

I lurked around the parapet after they left, hoping someone else would see me and report me back to the Prince. I was just about to give up and start wandering around the rest of the castle when the two guards returned, with Prince Hamlet in tow. Hamlet looked annoyed and sleepy, as if the guards had pulled him out of bed.

"There it is," one of the guards said.

"Spooky as all hell," said the other.

The Prince looked at me through squinted eyes. This is the moment, I thought. If he didn't buy my disguise, I'd be up shit creek.

"What are you?" the Prince asked at length.

"It is I, your father," I replied. I thought about moaning again, but decided it would be hokey.

The Prince started, eyes blinking, and drew back. "Merciful heavens, it *is* my father!" He turned to the guards. "You were right. Oh, my father has returned."

"Hamlet, my son," I said in as woeful a voice as I could.

The Prince turned back to me. His eyes were full of tears, and his lower lip trembled.

"What is it, oh my Father?"

This was pathetic. I knew Hamlet was prone to superstition, even at the height of his empire, but I'd had no idea he was this pathetic. "I would beg of thee a boon," I said.

"Anything, Father, anything."

"My brother, thine uncle Claudius, thou knowest him?"

"Aye, I do."

"After I did die, he stole my wife and throne."

"So? When he dies I'll be king."

"But my death would not then be avenged!"

"Father, why should thy death be avenged? It was a natural death, were it not?"

"Nay, my son. Thine uncle murdered me!"

Hamlet gasped. "Murdered? But how?"

"While I slept in the garden, he snuck up to me, and poured a bit of poison in my ear. I died in terrible seizures and agony."

"Nay, thou didst die in they sleep, in the comfort of thine own bed. So did the royal coroner assure me."

"Ah, but didst thou behold my corpse?"

He looked doubtful. "Nay, I did not."

"Then who wouldst thou believe? The royal coroner, who art in the pay of the king, or thine own father's roaming, unhomed spirit?"

"Hm, tough one." Hamlet rubbed his chin.

"Thy father!" I shouted at him. "Thine own father! I thus command!"

Hamlet cried out and dropped to his knees. "I'm sorry, father! I swear, I will expose thy killer, and see that he meets justice!"

I nodded, sure that my deed was done. I pressed the callback button in my pocket; the temporal transfer would give the Prince and the guards an impressive light show for them to remember. "Avenge me," I said again, just for verisimilitude. I knew my voice was going to fade for him. "Avenge me. Avenge me."

And then I was back at the ChronoCorps Headquarters.

###

Things were hectic at the ChronoCorps headquarters. No, not hectic. The word for the mood at ChronoCorps HQ when I returned from medieval Denmark was panic.

Mr. Wells came running up to me as soon as I stepped out of the chamber. "Herb!" he shouted. "Herbert! Things are going to hell! What did you do?"

I shook my head in confusion. "What? I didn't do anything. I just did my job, distracted Prince Hamlet from founding the empire by forcing him to focus on avenging his father's assassination."

"Well now the history books are showing that the Danish Empire had control of all of Western Europe, including England, as well as parts of Russia, as late as 1799. Do you have any idea what this does to the canon?"

"I swear, I did exactly what the plan called for. No deviations."

"Yeah, well, now history records that you showed up to three soldiers and to some guy named Horatio who claims you showed up in full armor. You were only supposed to appear

before two soldiers. Horatio said that this warrior apparition inspired Prince Hamlet to great leadership."

"But that's not what happened. This Horatio person must have been lying."

Mr. Wells quivered like a nervous rabbit. "Well, you have to go back. Fix this before it gets too complicated. The canon states that Norway invades Denmark, and Hamlet capitulates. He isn't supposed to fight them off and build an empire. You have to go back to distract him again."

"But how?" It would be impossible for me to go back and replay that scene on the castle wall. The laws of temporal transfer would prevent it.

"We'll send you to a point near that moment. The deviant record shows that Prince Hamlet had a conversation with his mother that made him forget his mission of revenge and get back on track. You must sabotage that meeting."

I nodded. "I'll do the best I can."

"You'll do better than that. You'll do it right!"

I shook my head and rolled my eyes. Then I turned and went back into the temporal chamber.

###

Prince Hamlet was already in his mother's room when I returned to Elsinore, having a tearful conversation with her. I could tell she was trying to comfort him, and that he was already beginning to think more clearly.

I found myself tangled up in a curtain. The temporal teleport had gone wrong, and I was

mostly insubstantial. I shifted about and cursed, knowing that I was almost entirely inaudible as well.

But the curtains shifted anyway. Hamlet jumped up from where he was sitting and cried out, "A rat!" He drew his sword and lunged forward. I shut my eyes instinctively, certain I was going to get stabbed, but it turned out Hamlet was aiming right next to me.

"Ahh!" cried a voice. The curtain I was tangled up in shifted, and out fell an old man, balding, with a long gray beard.

Hamlet looked down disdainfully at the fallen old man. "Thou wretched, rash, intruding fool," he said. "That'll teach you to spy on my mom." Then he looked up and straight at me. He paled. "My father!" he cried out.

I realized that despite my insubstantial state, the prince could see me.

"Hamlet, my son," I said.

"Son, who are you talking to?" asked Hamlet's mother.

Hamlet ignored her. "What are you doing here?"

"You're off track," I said. "Remember my murder? You're supposed to be carrying out your revenge."

He nodded contritely. "I'm sorry, father. Of course, I'll get right back on it. Claudius must die for what he's done!"

"There's a good boy," I said. "And be good to your mom. She's had a rough time." Then the temporal bond faded, and I was brought back to the 25th century.

###

"Had to do a little damage control," Mr. Wells told me when I met him the next day for debriefing. "That conversation with his mother... What did you do?"

"Just what we talked about. I showed up all ghostly and told him to get back on track."

"Yes, well, after that he still went on to become King. Then Emperor. Emperor Hamlet the Terrible, he was called. It was a bloody reign of terror for fifty years after that conversation with his mother."

"Is that part of historical canon?" I asked. It didn't sound familiar.

"Hardly. We had to take drastic measures."

"Meaning what?"

"We had an agent go back and assassinate Hamlet in his youth."

"But there's a record of Hamlet," I protested. "He's part of the canon."

"Well, not anymore. Not as such, at least. The canon now shows that Hamlet was just a character in a play by William Shakespeare."

"Shakespeare?"

"Hack playwright from Renaissance England. He wasn't part of the canon until we attempt to resolve the Hamlet divergence. Apparently Prince Hamlet is some sort of a causality nexus; he has to be in the canon somewhere."

"But at least the canon's fixed, right? There's no golden age of Denmark? No Danish Empire?"

Mr. Wells smiled, then gave me an awkward pat on the shoulder. "Well, sort of. The canon is going to need some adjusting but on the whole, you did good."

I sighed with relief. I'd been afraid that I'd screwed up the mission completely. "Thank you, Mr. Wells."

"Speaking confidentially," he said, leaning in, "I'm going to put you in for a promotion. I think you could handle more field assignments, don't you think?"

I grinned in spite of myself. "Oh, absolutely."

"Good. Because there's another situation coming up. Some problems with a guy named Torquemada in the fifteenth century. Going a little soft when he should be a big player. You up for it?"

"Absolutely."

"Good." Mr. Wells patted me on the shoulder again, just as awkwardly.

"Though I have to say," I added, "I never expected the Spanish Inquisition."