

Act 4 Scene 2

GONERIL and EDMUND enter.

GONERIL

Welcome, my lord. I'm surprised that my bland husband hasn't met us on the way.

OSWALD enters.

[To OSWALD] Now, where's your master?

OSWALD

He's inside, madam. But you've never seen a man so changed. I told him that the French army had landed, and he smiled at the news. I told him that you were coming, and he answered with "too bad." When I told him about Gloucester's treachery and his son Edmund's loyal service, he called me "fool," and told me I had it backwards. The things he ought to dislike seem pleasant to him, and what should be good news offends him.

GONERIL

[To EDMUND] Then you shouldn't come any further. It's my husband's cowardly terror that keeps him from taking risks. He'll ignore insults that should require him to retaliate. But what you and I talked about on the way here—our desire for each other—may soon be realized. Edmund, go back to my brother-in-law Cornwall. Help gather his troops and lead his armies. When I get home, I will change roles with Albany, and thus make my husband play the housewife. This trusty servant Oswald can carry messages between us. If you trust yourself to ask, you will soon be likely to hear my command as both Duchess and as your lover. Wear this for me. [She gives him a favor] Don't speak. Bend down to me. If this kiss could speak, it would encourage you to do great things. [She kisses EDMUND] I hope you understand. Farewell.

EDMUND

I'm your servant until death.

GONERIL

My dearest Gloucester!

EDMUND exits.

Oh, how different two men can be! You deserve my services as a woman, Edmund. My foolish husband still thinks he possesses me.

OSWALD

Madam here comes my lord.

OSWALD exits.

ALBANY enters.

GONERIL

So, I'm finally worth your time.

ALBANY

Oh Goneril, you aren't worth the dust that the rude wind blows in your face. I fear your nature. I can't trust anyone who condemns her own father. A woman who cuts herself off from her family is like a branch that tries to break away from the tree that gave it life—she must wither and come to ruin.

GONERIL

No more of that. Your sermon is stupid.

ALBANY

Wisdom and goodness seem vile to vile people. To the filthy everything seems filthy. What have you done? You two tigers—not daughters—what wicked deeds have you done? You barbarous degenerates, you've driven your father crazy. He once was a gracious old man whom even an angry bear would respect. How could my good brother-in-law allow you to do it, when he himself was given his power by the king? If the heavens don't send down avenging angels to punish these terrible crimes, then the end will come: humanity must turn on itself, all of us destroying each other like monsters from the deep.

GONERIL

You cowardly man, you always turn the other cheek and let abuse rain down on your head. You can't tell the difference between restraining yourself and being taken advantage of. You don't realize that only fools pity villains like Gloucester,

whom we punish before they can commit their crimes. Where's your war drum? The King of France spreads his banners in our peaceful country and your kingdom is at risk of war. But all you do is sit here, you moralising fool, and complain, "Alas, why is he doing that?"

ALBANY

Look at yourself, devil! Moral deformity is expected in devils, so it doesn't seem as horrible in them as it does when it appears in a woman.

GONERIL

Oh, useless fool!

ALBANY

Shame on you, you warped and false creature! Don't make faces at me and express your inner monstrous nature. If I could allow my hands to do what my heart desires, I would rip you in two. But even if you are a devil, I won't hurt a woman.

GONERIL

What a man you are, meowing like a kitten!

The FIRST MESSENGER enters.

ALBANY

What's the news?

FIRST MESSENGER

Oh, my lord, the Duke of Cornwall's dead. He was killed by his servant as he was about to gouge out Gloucester's other eye.

ALBANY

Gloucester's eyes?

FIRST MESSENGER

A servant of his own house was moved by pity to oppose Cornwall's actions. He drew his sword against his great master, who became enraged and attacked and

killed the servant—but not before he had received the wound that killed him afterward.

ALBANY

This shows that there *is* justice in heaven. It's proved by the fact that these earthly crimes are punished so quickly! But oh, poor Gloucester. Did he lose his other eye?

FIRST MESSENGER

Both, both, my lord.

[*To GONERIL*] This letter, madam, demands an immediate answer. It's from your sister.

GONERIL

[*To herself*] In a way I'm glad that Cornwall's dead. But now that Regan is a widow, and my Edmund is with her, then Edmund might choose her over me. Then all my fantasies will crumble, and I'll have to continue this hateful life. But in another way, the news is not so tragic.

[*To FIRST MESSENGER and ALBANY*] I'll go read the letter and answer it.

GONERIL exits.

ALBANY

Where was Gloucester's son Edmund when they took out his father's eyes?

FIRST MESSENGER

He was riding here with my lady.

ALBANY

But he's not here.

FIRST MESSENGER

No, my good lord. I met him on his way back.

ALBANY

Does he know about all this wickedness?

FIRST MESSENGER

Yes, my lord. He was the one who informed against his father and left the house so that they could punish Gloucester fully without worrying about Edmund's feelings.

ALBANY

Gloucester, I will live to thank you for the love you showed the king, and I'll avenge your eyes.

[To *FIRST MESSENGER*] Come here, friend. Tell me what else you know.

They exit.