

**Act 5 Scene 3**

EDMUND, victorious, enters with drums and banners. LEAR and CORDELIA enter as prisoners, led by the CAPTAIN and soldiers.

EDMUND

Have some officers take them away. Guard them carefully until we know what punishment has been decided for them.

CORDELIA

[To LEAR] We're not the first ones to have made things worse with only the best of intentions. I'm unhappy for your sake, poor, oppressed King. If it were me alone in this situation, I could be defiant in the face of bad luck. Should we see your daughters, my sisters?

LEAR

No, no, no, no! Come, let's go to prison. We two will sing like birds in a cage. When you ask me for my blessing, I'll kneel and ask you for your forgiveness. So, we'll live, and pray, and sing, and tell old tales, and laugh at trivial matters, and listen to courtiers gossiping, and talk to them too—we'll find out who's winning and who's losing, who's in and who's out. And we'll ponder the mysteries of life as if we were God's spies sent to observe the world. And in our walled prison we'll outlast all the politicians and rulers whose power comes and goes like the tide.

EDMUND

Take them away.

LEAR

Even the gods should celebrate the sacrifices you've made for me, my Cordelia. Are we really together again? Now it would take divine lightning bolt to separate us, like a fire to drive foxes out of their den. Wipe your eyes. Our enemies will waste away with age before they can make us cry again. We'll watch them starve before that. Come.

LEAR and CORDELIA exit led by soldiers.

EDMUND

Come here, captain. Listen. *[He gives the CAPTAIN a document]* Take this note. Follow them to prison. I've already gotten you promoted once. If you follow these instructions, you'll be well rewarded. Know this: we must adapt ourselves to these harsh times. A soldier can't afford to be tender-hearted. There can be no discussion about this assignment. Say you'll do it, or else you can find a different job.

CAPTAIN

I'll do it, my lord.

EDMUND

Then go to it and feel fortunate that you've been given such a high-paying task. Go immediately, I say, and do exactly what I've written.

CAPTAIN

I can't do a horse's work, pulling a cart or eating dried oats. But if it's man's work, then I'll do it.

The CAPTAIN exits.

Trumpets play. The Duke of ALBANY, GONERIL, REGAN and soldiers enter.

ALBANY

*[To EDMUND]* Sir, today you've shown your courageous lineage, and luck has been on your side. You've captured the leaders of our opposition. I need to take custody of them now, to treat them according to their honor and do what is best for our kingdom's safety.

EDMUND

Sir, I thought it would be best if I sent the old, miserable king to a prison cell with a guard. Lear's old age and his title have the power to make common folk take his side, and he could even make our drafted soldiers turn against us. I sent his daughter Queen Cordelia along with him, for the same reason. They're ready to appear whenever you want to hold your trial for them, tomorrow or at some future point. Right now, we are all sweating and bleeding. Friends have lost friends, and soldiers will curse even the best of causes in the heat of battle.

We need to find a more appropriate place where we can make sure Cordelia and her father have a fair trial.

ALBANY

By your leave, sir: you are my subordinate in waging this war, not my equal.

REGAN

That's for me to decide. I think you should have asked for my opinion before speaking to him like that. He led our armies and acted as my proxy in battle. His close connection to me means that he might as well consider himself your equal.

GONERIL

Not so fast. He has distinguished himself with his own merits more than any honors you've conferred upon him.

REGAN

I'm the one who invested my authority in him, and with it he proved his merit.

ALBANY

If he married you, that investment would be complete.

REGAN

You joke, but it might come true.

GONERIL

Hey, hey! You're squinting with jealousy and can't see straight.

REGAN

Lady, I'm not feeling well, or else I would answer you with my full temper.

[To EDMUND] General, take my soldiers, my prisoners, and my inheritance. Do whatever you want with them, and with me. You have conquered the fortress of my heart. Let the world be my witness that I hereby make you my lord and master.

GONERIL

Are you going to sleep with him right now?

ALBANY

[To GONERIL] It's not in your power to prevent it.

EDMUND

Nor is it in yours, lord.

ALBANY

Yes it is, you illegitimate fellow.

REGAN

[To EDMUND] Let the drums beat, and fight anyone who challenges your right to me.

ALBANY

Wait, and listen to reason. —Edmund, I now arrest you for capital treason, and as an accessory to your treason I arrest this snake of a woman. [He points to GONERIL]

[To REGAN] But, my fair sister-in-law, as for your claim to him, I veto your engagement on my wife's behalf. She's the one who is already engaged to Edmund. If you want to get married, then start wooing me. My lady is already spoken for.

GONERIL

What a ridiculous story!

ALBANY

You have a sword, Gloucester. Let the trumpets sound. If no one appears to challenge you and prove that you are a hideous traitor, then I'll do it myself. [He throws down his glove as a challenge] I make this promise on your life: I won't eat again until I prove that you're just as guilty as I say you are.

REGAN

Oh, I feel sick, sick!

GONERIL

*[To herself]* If she's not sick, I'll never trust poison again.

EDMUND

*[Throwing down his glove]* I accept your challenge. Whoever calls me a traitor is a villainous liar. Blow your trumpet. I'll fight to firmly prove my truth and honor to anyone who dares approach—you, or anyone else.

ALBANY

Hey, a herald!

*[To EDMUND]* Trust in your own unaided strength now, for your soldiers were all drafted in my name. And in my name, they have been discharged.

REGAN

I can feel my sickness growing.

ALBANY

She is not well. Take her to my tent.

Soldiers help REGAN exit.

A HERALD enters.

Come here, herald. —Let the trumpet sound! —Read this. *[He gives the HERALD a document]*

HERALD

*[Reading]* "If any honorable man of the army will accuse Edmund, the supposed Earl of Gloucester, of being a traitor, then let him appear by the third sound of the trumpet. Edmund is willing to fight in his own defense."

The first trumpet sounds.

HERALD

Again!

The second trumpet sounds.

HERALD

Again!

The third trumpet sounds. Another trumpet answers offstage. EDGAR enters at the third trumpet's sound, in armor and wearing a sword.

ALBANY

[To the HERALD] Ask him what he wants, and why he's stepping forward at this call of the trumpet.

HERALD

Who are you? What is your name and your rank? And why do you step forward now?

EDGAR

Know this: my name has been lost to a traitorous worm. But I am as noble as the opponent I've come to fight.

ALBANY

And which opponent is that?

EDGAR

Who speaks for Edmund, Earl of Gloucester?

EDMUND

I speak for myself. What do you have to say to me?

EDGAR

Draw your sword. If I offend your noble heart with my words, then you can take your revenge with your sword. Here is mine. *[He draws his sword]* Look: it is the symbol of my honor, my vows, and my privilege as a knight. I now solemnly declare that—despite your strength, youth, rank, and power; and despite your recent victory, newly-minted fortune, courage, and bravery—you are a traitor. You have betrayed your gods, your brother, and your father, and you've conspired against this noble, glorious duke. From the top of your head to the soles of your feet you are a filthy, tainted traitor. If you disagree with me, then I'm ready to use my sword, my arm, and my courage to prove that you are a liar.

EDMUND

Prudence would suggest that I ask your name first. But since you look so noble and knightly—and since your speech implies that you are of a high rank—I will disdain the rules of knighthood that say I can refuse to fight a man I don't know. I toss your accusations of treason back at your own head, and your hateful lies back at your heart. They hardly hurt you now, but I'll follow them with my sword and embed the word "traitor" in your heart forever. Trumpets, blow!

Trumpets play. EDMUND and EDGAR fight. EDMUND falls.

ALBANY

Save him, save him!

GONERIL

This was trickery, Gloucester. By the laws of dueling you didn't have to fight an unknown opponent. You haven't been conquered—only cheated and deceived.

ALBANY

Shut your mouth, woman, or I'll plug it up with this paper. Look, sir. *[He gives the letter to EDMUND]* Read your own evil, you who are worse than any words could describe.

*[To GONERIL]* No, don't tear it, lady. I think you know what it says.

GONERIL

And what if I do? I make the laws, not you. Who can prosecute me for it?

ALBANY

Oh, how monstrous!

[To EDMUND] Do you know what this letter is?

EDMUND

Do not ask me what I know.

GONERIL exits.

ALBANY

Go after her. She's desperate. Restrain her.

A soldier exits.

EDMUND

I have done all the things you've accused me of—and more, much more. You'll find out the rest in due time. But now it's over, and so am I.

[To EDGAR] But who are you who defeated me? If you're a nobleman, I forgive you.

EDGAR

Let's exchange forgiveness. I am no less noble than you are, Edmund. And if I'm more noble, then you've wronged me even more. My name is Edgar, and I'm your father's son. The gods are just and use the sins we commit in giving ourselves pleasure as a means of making instruments to torment us. The adultery he committed created you and cost him his eyes.

EDMUND

You've spoken rightly. It's true. The wheel of fortune has come full circle. Here I am on the bottom again.

ALBANY

I could tell that you were noble even by the way you walked. Let me hug you. I swear that I never hated you or your father.

EDGAR

Worthy prince, I know.

ALBANY

Where have you been hiding yourself? How do you know about your father's suffering?

EDGAR

By nursing him through it, my lord. Listen to my brief tale, and when it's over, oh, may my heart burst! To escape the proclamation condemning me to death, I disguised myself in the rags of a crazy beggar, making myself a creature scorned even by dogs. Oh, how sweet life must be, that we prefer the pain of slowly dying to death itself! In this disguise I met my father with his bloody eye sockets—his precious eyes recently lost—and I became his guide. I led him, begged for him, and saved him from despair. I never—oh, what a mistake! —revealed myself to him until just half an hour ago, when I was in my armor. I hoped for a successful outcome to the battle, but I still decided to ask for my father's blessing, and I told him the whole story of my journey. But his cracked heart was too weak to support such extremes of joy and grief at once, and it gave out.

EDMUND

Your words have moved me and may end up doing some good. But continue. You look like you have something more to say.

ALBANY

If there's anything more sorrowful to add, then keep it to yourself. I'm already about to lose myself to tears from hearing this much.

EDGAR

This might have seemed like a fitting end for a sad story. But if I go on, I must add to what is already too much, and reach a new extremity of sorrow. While I was crying loudly over my father, a man came in. He had seen me in my beggar's clothes and shunned me earlier, but when he found out who I was, he wrapped

his strong arms around my neck and cried as if he was trying to burst heaven. He then threw himself on my father and told the saddest story that was ever heard about Lear and him. And as he told the story his grief overcame him, and his heartstrings began to break. Then I heard the trumpets blow twice, and I left him in a trance.

ALBANY

But who was this man?

EDGAR

Kent, sir. It was the banished Kent, who disguised himself and followed his hostile king—serving him with tasks too menial for even a slave.

The GENTLEMAN enters with a bloody knife.

GENTLEMAN

Help, help, oh, help!

EDGAR

What kind of help?

ALBANY

Speak, man!

EDGAR

What does that bloody knife mean?

GENTLEMAN

It's hot, it's still smoking with life blood. It was just removed from the heart of—oh, she's dead!

ALBANY

Who's dead? Speak, man.

GENTLEMAN

Your wife Goneril, sir, your wife. And she poisoned her sister Regan, who's now dead too. She confessed it.

EDMUND

I was engaged to them both. We three will now be united in death.

EDGAR

Here comes Kent.

ALBANY

Bring the bodies here, whether they're alive or dead.

The GENTLEMAN exits.

KENT enters.

The judgment of the gods makes us tremble, but it doesn't make us pity these deaths. Oh, is this him? There's no time for the greetings that good manners require.

KENT

I am here to say goodnight forever to my king and master. Is he not here?

ALBANY

What a thing for us to forget! Speak, Edmund, where's the king? And where's Cordelia?

REGAN and GONERIL's corpses are brought out.

Do you see this spectacle, Kent?

KENT

Alas, why has this happened?

EDMUND

Despite everything, Edmund was beloved. One sister poisoned the other for my sake, and then killed herself.

ALBANY

It seems so. Cover their faces.

EDMUND

These are my last breaths. I want to do a little good despite my nature. Go quickly—be speedy about it—to the castle. For I've ordered the executions of Lear and Cordelia. Hurry send someone now!

ALBANY

Run, run, oh, run!

EDGAR

Where should we run, my lord? Who has the orders to kill them? Send something to prove that you've changed your commands.

Edmund

Good idea. Take my sword. The captain—give it to the captain.

EDGAR

Run as if your life depended on it.

*A soldier exits.*

EDMUND

Your wife and I ordered the captain to hang Cordelia in the prison and lay the blame on her own despair, making it look like she killed herself.

ALBANY

May the gods protect her!

*[To soldiers] Carry him away for now.*

*Soldiers exit with EDMUND.*

LEAR enters with CORDELIA in his arms, followed by An OFFICER.

LEAR

Howl, howl, howl, howl! Oh, you are men of stone! If I had your eyes to weep and your tongues to cry out, I'd use them until the sky itself cracked. She's gone forever. But I know how to tell when someone is dead and when they're alive. She's as dead as the senseless ground. Bring me a mirror. If her breath makes a mist on the glass, then she's still alive.

KENT

Is this the end of the world?

EDGAR

Or a reflection of that final horror?

ALBANY

Let the world collapse and end!

LEAR

This feather moved with her breath. She lives. If it's true, then it will make up for all the sorrows I've ever felt.

KENT

Oh, my good master!

LEAR

Please, go away.

EDGAR

It's noble Kent, your friend.

LEAR

A plague on you, you're all murderers and traitors! I could have saved her. Now she's gone forever.

[To *CORDELIA*'s body] Cordelia, Cordelia, stay a little while. What? What are you saying?

[To the others] Her voice was always so soft, gentle, and low—an excellent thing in a woman.

[To *CORDELIA*'s body] I killed the scum who was hanging you.

OFFICER

It's true, my lords, he did.

LEAR

Didn't I, man? In the old days I would've made them all dance with my sword. But I am old now, and my trials have worn me down.

[To *KENT*] Who are you? My eyesight's not the best. I'll recognize you soon.

KENT

This man was the luckiest and then the unluckiest that ever lived.

LEAR

My vision is failing. Are you not Kent?

KENT

I am. Your servant Kent. Where is your servant Caius?

LEAR

He's a good fellow, I can tell you that. He'll strike when in a fight, and quickly too. But now he's dead and rotting.

KENT

No, my good lord. I am Caius, the man—

LEAR

I'll deal with this soon.

KENT

—who followed you from the very beginning of your suffering and decline.

LEAR

You're welcome here.

KENT

No, I'm not welcome. No one is welcome. Everything is cheerless, dark, and dreadful. Your eldest daughters have killed themselves and died in despair.

LEAR

Yes, I think that's true.

ALBANY

He doesn't know what he's saying. It's useless to try to explain it to him.

A MESSENGER enters.

EDGAR

It's pointless.

MESSENGER

Edmund is dead, my lord.

ALBANY

That's just a drop in this ocean of sorrow. You lords and noble friends hear what I intend to do. We must try to bring as much comfort as we can amid this great destruction. And as for me, I will surrender my power to the old king, that he should have absolute authority for the rest of his life.

[To EDGAR and KENT] And you will get back your rightful property and titles, along with rewards and distinctions that you have more than earned. All my friends will taste the rewards of their virtue, and all my enemies will drink from the cup of punishment that they deserve. Oh, look, look!

LEAR

And my poor child was hanged.

[To *CORDELIA*'s body] No, no, no life left in you? Why should a dog, a horse, or a rat have life, but you have none at all? Oh, you'll never come to me again, never, never, never, never, never.

[To the others] Please, undo this button. Thank you, sir. Do you see this? Look at her. Look, her lips. Look there, look there. Oh, oh, oh, oh. [He dies]

EDGAR

He faints!

[To *LEAR*] My lord, my lord!

KENT

Break, heart. Please, break!

EDGAR

[To *LEAR*] Look up, my lord.

KENT

Don't disturb his departing spirit. Oh, let him pass on. He would hate anyone who made him linger in this torturous world any longer.

EDGAR

Oh, he is dead indeed.

KENT

It's a wonder that he endured for so long. He was only living on borrowed time.

ALBANY

Carry them away from here. Our business is now to grieve.

[To KENT and EDGAR] My dear friends, you two should rule this kingdom and keep the wounded country alive.

KENT

I have a journey to make soon, sir. My master calls me on to following him to the next life, and I cannot say no.

EDGAR

We must bear the weight of this sad day, and say what we feel, not what we ought to say. The oldest has suffered the most. We who are young will never see as much as he has seen or live so long.

They exit in a funeral march.