

# **King Lear**

**by William Shakespeare**  
Presented by Paul W. Collins

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## Chapter One Dividing

As they await the imminent arrival of King Lear at the royal palace in central Britain, the many summoned visitors, nobles and gentry from around his island realm exchange information and opinion. The aging monarch's youngest daughter is to be married—and rumor anticipates an historic event: it's thought he intends to step aside—and divide his realm.

Among those gathered in the throne room this summer morning in antiquity, twenty-eight centuries ago, are the Earls of Kent and Gloucester, two of the sovereign's most devoted subjects.

"I thought the king had more affected the Duke of Albany than Cornwall," says Kent. Lord Albany, the husband of Lear's eldest daughter, Goneril, governs from a fortress in the north.

Gloucester's midland castle is not far from here. "It did always seem so to us," he says, "but now, in the division of the kingdom, it appears not *which* of the dukes he values more; for equities are so weighed that curiosity in neither can make choice of either's moiety."

The castle of the ambitious Duke of Cornwall, married to the king's second daughter, Regan, lies in the southwest, on the Cornish peninsula.

"Is not this your son, my lord?" asks Kent, of the man standing with them, tall and handsome at thirty.

"His breeding, sir, hath been at my charge; I have so often blushed to acknowledge him that now I am brazed to it."

Kent is taken aback by the reply. "I cannot conceive you...."

Gloucester chuckles. "Sir, this young fellow's *mother* could!—whereupon she grew round-wombed, and had, indeed, sir, a son for her cradle ere she had a husband for her bed. Do you smell a fault?"

Kent smiles at the younger man. "I cannot wish the fault undone, the issue of it being so proper."

"But I have, sir, a son by order of *law*," Gloucester notes, "some year elder than this, who yet is no dearer in my account. Though this knave came something saucily into the world before he was sent for, yet was his mother fair!—there was good sport at his making, and the whoreson must be acknowledged," he says genially. "Do you know this noble gentleman, Edmund?"

"No, my lord."

"My lord of *Kent*; remember him hereafter as my honourable friend."

Edmund bows. "My services to Your Lordship."

Kent nods, courteously: "I must love you, and sue to know you better."

"Sir, I shall study deserving."

"He hath been out nine years, and away he shall again," says Gloucester; Edmund has lived in France, at first as a college student. The earl, noticing an increased buzz in the room, looks to the doors. "The king is coming!"

A peal of cornets is sounded as King Lear, in a dark-red robe trimmed with white ermine, enters the hall. Following in procession are the dukes of Albany and Cornwall, their wives, Goneril and Regan, and Cordelia, at twenty-five the king's youngest child—all with their attendants. The ruler steps up to the dais and seats himself on the throne as the royal party arrays itself before him at the front of the crowded stone hall.

The king motions for a nobleman to come forward. "Attend the lords of France and Burgundy, Gloucester."

"I shall, my liege," says the earl, bowing. He and Edmund proceed through a side chamber to greet, with appropriate diplomatic salutations, the two royal guests just arrived from the Continent—suitors for the hand of Cordelia.

"Meantime," says King Lear, addressing his court, "we shall express our darker"—less apparent—"purpose. Give me the map there." Attention doubles as he unrolls the chart of his

domain and gazes at it, pondering for a moment. He hands it, brusquely, to an attendant, who holds the map up to view.

“Know that we have divided in *three* our kingdom; and ’tis our fast intent to shake all cares and business from our age, conferring them on younger strengths, while we, unburthened, crawl toward death.

“Our son of *Cornwall*, and you, our no-less-loving son of *Albany*, we have this hour a constant will to publish our daughters’ several dowers, so that future strife may be prevented now. The princes of France and Burgundy, great rivals in our youngest daughter’s love, long in our court have made their amorous sojourns, and here are to be *answerèd*.

“Tell me, my daughters, since now we will divest us of both ruling interest of territory and cares of state, which of you shall we say doth love us most, so that we our largest bounty may extend where *merit* doth with nature challenge.

“Goneril, our eldest-born, speak first!”

That lady, her demeanor regal at forty-two, steps forward and curtseys, slowly and deeply. “Sir, I love you more than words can wield the matter!—dearer than eye-sight, space, and liberty; beyond what can be valued rich or rare!—no less than *life*, with grace, health, beauty, honour!—as much as child e’er loved, or father found!—a love that makes breath poor, and speech unable! Beyond all manner of so much, *I love you!*”

The youngest daughter eschews hyperbole. *What shall Cordelia do?* she thinks. *Love—and be silent.*

But the king is quite pleased with the professed adoration. He turns to the map. “Of all these bounds, even from this line to this”—the northern third of his land, from the highlands south toward the Humber River—“with shadowy forests and rich with plains, with plenteous rivers and wide-skirted meads, we make thee *lady!*—to thine and Albany’s issue be this perpetual!

“What says our second daughter, our dearest Regan, wife to Cornwall? Speak!”

Regan steps forward, and she provides an equally deep, equally elaborated curtsy. “Sir, I am made of the self-same mettle that my sister is, and prize me at her worth! In my true heart I find she names my very *deed* of love!—only she comes too *short!*—in that *I* profess myself an enemy to *all other joys* which the most precious choir of sense possesses!—and find I am felicitate in Your Dear Highness’ love alone!”

Thinks her younger sister: *Then poor Cordelia! And yet not so, since I am sure my love’s more richer than my tongue!*

King Lear smiles, satisfied with the flattery, and points to the map. “To thee and thine hereditary ever remain this ample third of our fair kingdom!—no less in space, validity, and pleasure, than that conferred on Goneril!” Regan and the duke are to hold sway from Cornwall east through Sarum Plain to Kent, at the island’s southeastern edge, just across from France.

The rich remainder—fertile midland counties, the king’s ancestral lands—awaits Cordelia, after the requisite obeisance and encomium. The courtiers and visitors are quiet but impatient, eager to discuss the consequence of these decrees.

“Now, our joy—although the last, not least!—to whose young love the vines of France and milk of Burgundy strive to be interested,” says the king, beaming at Cordelia. “What can you say to draw a third more opulent than your sisters’? Speak!”

Cordelia curtseys politely. “Nothing, my lord.”

The king stares. “*Nothing?*”

“Nothing.”

Lear frowns. “Nothing will come of *nothing*; speak again!”

“Unhappy I am that I cannot heave my heart into my mouth,” says Cordelia humbly. “I love Your Majesty according to my bond; not more nor less.”

Lear rises. “*How now*, Cordelia? Amend your *speech* a little, lest it may mar your *fortunes!*”

“Good my lord, you have begot me, raised me, loved me! I turn these duties back as are rightly fit: *obey you, love you, and most honour you!*”

She appeals to reason: “Why have my sisters *wives*, if they say they love you *all*? Haply, when I shall wed, that lord whose hand may take my plight shall carry *half* my love with *him*—half my care and duty! Surely I shall never marry like my sisters, to love my *father* all!”

The king’s face is flushed. “But goes thy *heart* with this?”

“Aye, good my lord!”

Lear glares at her. “So young—and so untender?”

“So young, my lord, and *true*.”

“Let it be so,” he utters sternly, in fast-rising anger. “Thy *truth*, then, be thy *dower*!—for by the sacred radiance of the *sun*, the mysteries of Hecate and the *night*!—by all the operations of the orbs from whom we do exist and cease to be, here I *disclaim* all my paternal care, propinquity and property of blood!” he exclaims, livid. “And hold *thee* as a *stranger* to my heart and me, from this *forever*!” he shouts.

The nobles gape, startled and stunned, but Lear rages on: “The barbarous *Scythian*, or he that makes his generation”—offspring—“*meals* to gorge his appetite, shall to my bosom be as well neighboured, pitied, and relieved as *thou*, my *sometime* daughter!”

Kent would stem the king’s hasty, intemperate harshness. “Good my *liege*—”

“*Peace*, Kent!” Lear scowls. “Come not between the dragon and his wrath! I loved her *most*, and thought to set my rest on her kind nursery!” Kent begins to protest. “*Hence*, and avoid my sight!” the king demands. “So be my *grave* my peace!—as here I take her father’s *heart* from her!”

Lear returns to his throne, grumbling. “Call France!” His still-astonished train stands motionless; he growls, “Who *stirs*?” Two knights spring into motion. “Call Burgundy!” the king demands as they hurry from the hall.

Lear’s anger impels him: “Cornwall and Albany, with my two *daughters*’ dowers digest this third!” he says, striking the map with the back of his hand. “Let *pride*, which she calls plainness, marry her!”

He tells the dukes, “I do invest you *jointly* with my power, pre-eminence, and all the large effects that troop with majesty!

“Ourself, by monthly course, shall our abode make with you by due *turns*, with reservation of an hundred knights by you to be sustained,” he rules. “We still retain only the *name*; and all the additions to a king—the sway, revenue, execution of the rest—belovèd sons, be *yours*. Which to confirm,” he says, “this coronet part betwixt you!” He pulls the golden circle from his head, disarranging wisps of white hair, and thrusts it at a wide-eyed young page.

Kent steps forward, entreating. “Royal Lear, whom I have ever *honoured* as my king, *loved* as my father, as my master *followed*, as my great patron thought on in my *prayers*—”

“The bow is *bent* and *drawn*!—make from the shaft!” The king, jaws clenched, eyes blazing, will brook no question.

“Let it *fly* rather!” cries the impassioned nobleman, “though the point invade the region of my heart! *Be* Kent unmannerly when Lear is *mad*!

“*What wilt thou do*, old man? Think’st thou that *duty* shall have dread to speak, when power to *flattery* bows? Honour’s *bound* to plainness, when majesty stoops to *folly*! *Reverse* thy doom,” he pleads, “and, in thy best consideration, *check* this hideous *rashness*!

“Let my *life* answer my judgment!—thy *youngest* daughter does not love thee *least*!—nor are those *empty*-hearted whose low sounds reverb no *hollowness*!”

Lear seethes, and speaks with menace: “Kent, on thy *life*, *no more*!”

But the earl is desperate. “My life I never held but as a *pawn* to wage against thy *enemies*!—nor fear I to *lose* it, thy *safety* being the motive!”

“*Out of my sight*!”

“See *better*, Lear! And let me still remain the *true* blank of thine eye!”

“*Now, by Apollo*!”

“*Now, by Apollo*, king, thou swear’st thy gods *in vain*!”—blaspheme.

“Oh, *vassal! Miscreant!*” Infuriated, Lear moves a hand to his sword.

“Dear sir, *forbear!*” pleads Albany.

“*Do!*” says Kent. “Kill thy *physician*, and the fee is bestowed upon thy foul *disease!*”

“*Revoke thy doom,*” the bold lord insists, “or, whilst I can vent clamour from my throat, I’ll *tell thee thou dost evil!*”

“*Hear me, recreant!*” cries Lear. “On thine *allegiance,*” he shouts to override Kent, “*hear me!*”

“Since thou hast sought to make us break our vow, which we durst never *yet*, and with strained pride to come between our sentence and our power, which not our nature nor our place can bear, our *potency* make good: *take thy reward!*”

“*Five days* we do allot thee for provision to shield thee from diseases of the world—and on the sixth, turn thy hated back upon our kingdom! If, on the *tenth* day following, thy *banished* trunk be found in our dominions, *the moment is thy death!*”

“*Away!* By Jupiter, this shall not be revoked!”

Kent bows stiffly. “Fare thee well, king. Sith thus thou wilt appear, *freedom* lives hence, and banishment is *here.*” He bows to Cordelia, and kisses her hand. “The gods to their dear shelter take thee, maid, who justly think’st, and hast most rightly *said!*”

He starts away, pausing to glance at Regan and Goneril. “And *your* large speeches may your *deeds* approve, so that good effects may spring from *words* of love!”

“Thus Kent, O princes, bids you all adieu! He’ll shape his old course in a country new!” He strides from the massive gray-stone building.

With a regal flourish, cornets announce the entrance of noblemen from Gaul: two of the twelve lords of the French people, accompanied by Gloucester.

“Here’s France and Burgundy, my noble lord,” says the earl, with a bow.

“My lord of Burgundy,” Lear begins, “we first address towards you, who with this king hath rivalled for our daughter. What, in the least, will you require in present *dower* with her, or cease your quest of love?”

The Duke of Burgundy smiles politely. “Most Royal Majesty, I crave no more than what Your Highness offered”—adding, drolly, “nor will that you tender *less.*”

“Right noble Burgundy, when she was *dear* to us, we did *hold* her so,” Lear tells him. “But now her price is fall’n. Sir, there she stands; if aught within that little-seeming substance, or all of it, with our *displeasure* piecèd—and *nothing more*—may fitly like Your Grace, she’s there, and she is yours.”

The prince is taken aback. “I know no answer....”

Lear presses: “Will you—with those infirmities she owns unfriended: newly adopted to our *hate*, strangered with our *oath*, and dowered with our *curse*—take her, or leave her?”

“Pardon me, royal sir, election makes not up on *such conditions!*”

“Then *leave* her, sir,” Lear advises, “for, by the Power that made me, I tell you all her wealth.”

He turns to France. “As for you, great king, I would not from your love make such a stray as to match you where I *hate!*—therefore I beseech you to avert your liking a more worthier way than on a wretch whom *Nature* is almost ashamed to acknowledge hers!”

The King of France is shocked; he has come to know Cordelia well during a year of formal courtship—and anger now grows within him at Lear’s contumely.

“This is most *strange,*” he says, “that she—who but even now was your best subject, the argument of your praise, balm of your age, the *last* most *dearest!*—should in this trice of time commit a thing so *monstrous* as to remove so many folds of *favour!*”

“Surely *your* fore-vouchèd affection is fall’n into *taint!* Or her offence must be of such *unnatural* degree that it monsters—which to believe of *her* must be a faith that Reason could never plant in me without *miracle!*”

Cordelia addresses her father with quiet dignity. “Even if I lack that glib and oily art to speak and *purpose* not, since what I well intend, I’ll *do*’t before I speak, I yet beseech Your Majesty that you make known it is no vicious plot, foulness, or murder—no unchaste action or dishonoured step—that hath deprived me of your grace and favour, but only that for the *lack* of which I am richer!—an ever-*soliciting* eye, and such a tongue as I am *glad* I have not, though not to have it hath lost me your liking.”

Lear scowls. “Better thou hadst *not been born* than not to have pleased me better!”

The King of France is amazed. “Is it but *this!*—tardiness in a nature which often leaves *unspoken* the story of what it *intends to do*?”

“My lord of Burgundy, what say you to the lady? Love’s not *love* when it is mingled with regard that stands aloof from the entire point! Will you have her? She is *herself* a dowry!”

“Royal Lear,” says the duke, “give but that portion which *yourself proposed*, and here I take Cordelia by the hand, Duchess of Burgundy!”

“*Nothing*,” says Lear pointedly. “I have sworn; I am firm.”

Burgundy turns to Cordelia. “I am sorry, then, you have so lost a father that you must lose a husband.”

“Peace be with Burgundy,” says Cordelia, hardly surprised. “Since that *respects of fortune* are his love, I shall not be his wife.”

The King of France beams, delighted. “*Fairest Cordelia!*—who art most *rich*, being poor, most *choice*, forsaken, and most *loved*, despised!—thee and thy virtues here I *seize upon!* Be it lawful, I *take up* what’s cast away!

“Gods, *gods!*—’tis strange that, from *thy cold*’st neglect, my love should kindle to inflamèd *respect!*”

He turns to Lear. “Thy dowerless daughter, king, thrown to my chance, is *queen* of us, of ours and our fair *France!* Not *all* the dukes of waterish Burgundy can buy this unprizèd, precious maid from me!

“Cordelia, bid them fare well, though unkind; thou lovest *here*, a better where to *find!*”

As he kisses her hand, the lady’s modest smile bespeaks her happiness.

Lear, rebuffed and rebuked, glowers. “Thou hast her, France. Let her be thine; for *we* have no such daughter, nor shall ever see that face of hers again. Therefore be gone without our grace, our love, our benison.”

He turns abruptly. “Come, noble Burgundy,” he says dourly, stalking to the doors, and belatedly accompanied by a ragged flourish from the startled men with cornets.

As the final court of King Lear’s reign empties, the King of France takes Cordelia’s hand. “Bid farewell to your sisters,” he says gently.

“The *jewels* of our father,” she tells them, “with washèd eyes Cordelia *leaves* you.

“I know you for what you are—but as a *sister* am most loath to call your faults what they are namèd! Use well our father; to your professèd bosoms I commit him. But yet, alas, stood I within his grace, I would refer him to a *better* place. So, farewell to you both.”

Regan scoffs. “Prescribe us not *our* duties!”

Sniffs Goneril, “Let your study be to content *your* lord, who hath received you as Fortune’s *alms*”—donation to the poor. “You have *obedience* scanted, and well are *worth* the want that you have wanted!”—deserved such a lack.

“Time shall unfold what plaited *cunning* hides,” Cordelia replies. “Who cover faults, at last *shame* them derides. Well may you prosper.”

Says the king, “Come, my fair Cordelia!” Hand in hand, followed by his train of courtiers, they depart—he to his beloved France, and she to a new life there as queen.

**G**oneril speaks privately: “Sister, it is not a *little* I have to say of what most nearly appertains to us both! I think our father will hence *tonight!*”

“That’s most certain, and with you; next month with *us*,” says Regan.

“You see how full of *changes* his age is; the observation we have made of it hath not been little! He always loved our sister most—and with what *poor judgment* he hath now cast her off appears too *grossly!*”

“’Tis the infirmity of his *age*. Yet he hath ever but slenderly known himself.”

Goneril concurs, glumly. “The *best* and *soudest* of his time hath been but rash. Then must we look to receive from his age not alone the imperfections of long-engrafted *condition*, but therewithal the *unruly waywardness* that infirm and choleric *years* bring with them!”

“Such inconstant starts are we likely to have from him as this of Kent’s *banishment*.”

Goneril nods. “There is *further* consequence of the leave-taking between *France* and him. If our father carry *authority* with such disposition as he bears, that *last surrender* of his will but further offend us!” she warns. “Pray you, let’s hie *together!*”

Regan agrees. “We shall further think on’t.”

“We must *do* something—and i’ the heat!”

## Chapter Two Machinations

Near the front of the Earl of Gloucester’s castle, Edmund stands in a corridor, holding a folded letter—and he broods.

*Thou, Nature, art my goddess; to thy law my services are bound! Wherefore should I stand in the plague of Custom, and permit the peculiarity of nations to deprive me for that I am some twelve or fourteen moon-shines lag of a brother?*

*Why bastard?—wherefore base?—when my dimensions are as well compacted, my mind as generous, and my shape as true as honest madam’s issue! Why brand they us with base?—with baseness, bastardy?*

*Base! Base?—who in the lusty stealth of nature take more composition and fierce quality than doth, within a dull, stale, tired bed, go to the creating a whole tribe of fops, begot ’tween sleep and wake!*

He remembers, angrily, Gloucester’s comment to Kent. *Our father’s love is not to the bastard Edmund as to the legitimate Edgar! Fine word, ‘legitimate!’*

*Well, then, Legitimate, I must have your land, my Legitimate! If this letter speed and my invention thrive, Edmund the base shall top thee, Legitimate!*

*I grow! I prosper! Now, gods, stand up for bastards!*

The earl, too, has just finished writing, but in a journal. Emerging from his study, he nods at Edmund—who quickly pushes the document into his coat.

Gloucester frowns, thinking of the day’s momentous events. “Kent *banished* thus! And France in *choler* parted! Then the king *gone tonight!* Subscribed his *power!*—confined to *exhibition!* All this done upon the gad!” He shakes his head. “Edmund, how now? What news?”

“So please Your Lordship, none.”

“Why so earnestly seek you to put up that letter?”

“I know no news, my lord.”

“What paper were you reading?”

“Nothing, my lord.”

“No? What needed, then, that terrible dispatch of it into your *pocket?* The quality of *nothing* hath not such need to hide itself! Let’s see! Come; if it be *nothing*, I shall not need spectacles!”

“I beseech you, sir, pardon me. It is a letter from my brother that I have not all o’er-read; and for so much as I *have* perused, I find it not fit for your o’er-looking.”

“Give me the letter, sir,” Gloucester demands, holding out a hand.

“I shall *offend*, either to detain or give it!” protests Edmund. “The contents, as in part I understand them, are *to blame*...”



Gloucester gestures impatiently. "Let's see, let's see."

"I hope, for my brother's justification, he wrote this but as a trial or test of my virtue."

Holding the paper at nearly arm's length, old Gloucester squints and reads aloud: "'This policy and reverence for *age* makes the world *bitter* in the best of our times!—keeps our fortunes from us till *our* oldness cannot relish them! I begin to find an idle and foolish *bondage* in the oppression of aged *tyranny*—which sways not as it hath *power*, but as it is *suffered*!"

"Come to me, so that of this I may speak more."

"If our father would sleep till I *waked* him, you should have half his revenue, and live forever the beloved of your brother, Edgar!"

The earl is dismayed. "*Conspiracy!* 'Sleep till I *waked* him....' You should enjoy '*half his revenue!*' My son *Edgar!* Had he the hand to write *this*—the heart and brain to *breed* it in?"

"When came this to you? Who brought it?"

"It was not brought me, my lord; there's the *cunning* of it. I found it thrown in at the casement of my room."

"You know the character"—handwriting—"to be your brother's?"

"If the matter were *good*, my lord, I durst swear it were his; but, in respect of that, I would fain think it were not."

Gloucester stares at the words. "It is his."

"It is his *hand*, my lord; but I hope his *heart* is not in the contents!"

"Hath he never heretofore sounded you in this business?"

"Never, my lord. But I have heard him oft maintain it to be fit that, sons at perfected age and fathers declining, the father should be as ward to the son, and the son manage his revenue."

"Oh, *villain, villain!*—his very opinion in the *letter!*" cries Gloucester. "Abhorrent *villain!* Unnatural, detested, *brutish villain!* Worse than brutish!"

"Go, sirrah, seek him! I'll *apprehend* him—abominable *villain!* Where is he?"

"I do not well know, my lord," Edmund tells the distraught nobleman. "If it shall please you to *suspend* your indignation against my brother till you can derive from him better testimony of his intent, you shall run a *certain* course; if you violently proceed against him *mistaking* his purpose, it would make a great gap in your *own* honour, and shake into pieces the heart of his *obedience!*"

"I dare pawn down my *life* for him that he hath wrote this to feel out my affection to Your Honour, and to no further pretence of danger!"

"Think you so?"

Edmund seems to consider. "If Your Honour judge it meet, I will place you where you shall hear us *confer* on this, and by an auricular assurance have your satisfaction—and that without any further delay than this very evening!"

Gloucester ponders, calming himself. "He cannot be such a *monster*—"

"Nor *is* not, surely!"

"—to his father, that so tenderly and entirely loves him! Heaven and earth! Edmund, seek him out; wind me into him, I pray you! Frame the business after your own wisdom. I would *unstate* myself, to be in a due resolution!"

"I will seek him, sir, immediately, convey the business as I shall find means, and acquaint you withal."

The earl, slightly stooped at sixty-two, moves to a tall window and looks out as evening shadows creep over his vast woodlands beyond. "These late eclipses in the sun and moon portend no good to us! Though by nature wisdom can *reason* it thus and thus, yet Nature finds *itself* scourged by the sequent *effects*: love *cools*, friendship *falls off*, brothers *divide*; in cities, *mutinies*; in countries, *discord*; in palaces, *treason!*"

"And the *bond* cracked 'twixt son and *father!* This villain of *mine* comes under the prediction!—*there's* son against father!"

"The *king* falls from the bias of nature; there's father against *child!*"

“We have *seen* the best of *our* time,” he moans. “Machinations, hollowness, treachery, and all ruinous disorders follow us disquietly to our graves.” He turns away from the window and his mournful reverie.

“Find *out* this villain, Edmund!—it shall lose thee nothing. Do it carefully.” He ambles away to his bedchambers, mumbling to himself. “And the noble and true-hearted Kent *banished!* His offence: *honesty!* ’Tis *strange....*”

Edmund watches him go. *This is the excellent foppery of the world, that when we are sick in fortune—often the surfeit of our own behavior!—we make guilty of our disasters the sun, the moon, and the stars, as if we were villains by necessity!—fools by heavenly compulsion, knaves, thieves, and treachers by spherical predominance!—drunkards, liars, and adulterers by an enforced obedience of planetary influence! And all that we are evil in, by a divine thrusting-on!*

*An admirable evasion of whoremaster Man, to lay his goatish disposition to the charge of a star! My father compounded with my mother under the dragon’s tail, and my nativity was under Ursa major—so that it follows I am rough and lecherous.* He laughs. *I should have been what I am had the maidenliest star in the firmament twinkled on my bastardizing!*

*Edgar....*

Edmund looks up just as his brother enters the hall. *And pat he comes, like the catastrophe of the old comedy!* He considers his demeanor. *My cue is villainous melancholy, with a sigh like Tom o’ Bedlam’s. Oh, these eclipses do portend these divisions! ‘Fa, sol, la, me!’* After three rising notes, he sounds a sharp fall.

Edgar is back from overseeing apple picking in the estate’s orchards. “How now, brother Edmund!” he says, cheerfully. “What serious contemplation are you in?”

“I am thinking, brother, of a prediction I read this other day of what should follow these *eclipses*,” he says gloomily.

Edgar is surprised; his brother is a hard-headed skeptic. “Do you busy yourself about that?”

“I promise you, the effects he writes of *come after*, unhappily—as do unnaturalness between the child and the *parent*; death, *dearth*, dissolution of ancient *amities*; divisions in *state*, menaces and maledictions against *king and nobles*; needless *diffidences*, banishment of *friends*, dissipation of *cohorts*, *nuptial* breaches!—and I know not what!”

“How long have *you* been a sectary *astronomical?*” asks the good-natured Edgar.

But Edmund’s tone turns urgent. “Come, come; when saw you my father last?”

“Why, the night gone by.”

“Spake you with him?”

“Aye, two hours together.”

“Parted you in *good terms?*” Edmund asks. “Found you no *displeasure* in him, by word or countenance?”

“None at all.”

Edmund regards him intently. “Bethink yourself wherein you may have *offended* him; and, at my entreaty, forbear his presence till some little time hath qualified the *heat* of his displeasure—which at this instant so *rageth* in him that *mischiefe on your person* would scarcely allay it!”

Edgar is alarmed. “Some villain hath done me a *wrong!*”

“That’s my fear,” says Edmund. “I pray you, have a continent forbearance till the speed of his rage goes slower; and, as I say, retire with me to my lodging, from whence I will fitly bring you to hear my lord speak.

“Pray ye, *go!*—there’s my key!” he says, his voice insistent. “If you do stir abroad, go armed!”

“*Armed*, brother?”

“Brother, I advise you to the best: *go armèd!*—I am no honest man if there be any *good* meaning towards you! I have told you what I have seen and heard but faintly—nothing like the *image* and *horror* of it! Pray you, *away!*”

Edgar, now fearful, heads for Edmund’s chambers. “Shall I hear from you anon?”

“I do serve you in this business!” *I’ll see to the business!*  
*A credulous father and a brother noble, whose nature is so far from doing harms that he suspects none—on whose foolish honesty my practises ride easy!*  
*Let me have lands!—if not by birth, by wit! All with me’s meet that I can fashion fit!*

Lady Goneril questions her steward, Oswald, this overcast morning at the Duke of Albany’s palace in the north. “Did my father *strike* my gentleman for *chiding* of his fool?”

“Yes, madam!”

“By day and night he wrongs me!” she fumes. “Every hour he flashes into one gross crime or other that sets us all at odds! I’ll not *endure* it! His knights grow *riotous*, and himself upbraids us on every trifle!

“When he returns from hunting, I will not speak with him!” She thinks. “Say I am sick. If you come slack of *former* services, you shall do well; the fault of it *I’ll* answer.”

There is a clamor outside. “He’s coming, madam!—I hear him!” Trumpets sound.

Goneril presses: “Put on what weary *negligence* you please, you and your fellows; I’ll have it *come to question!* If he *dislike* it, let him go to our sister!—whose mind and mine, I know, in that are *one*—not to be *over-ruled!*”

“*Idle old man*, that still would *manage* those authorities that he hath *given away!* Now, by my life, old fools are babes again, and must be used with *checks*, not flatteries, when they are seen to abuse!

“Remember what I tell you!”

Oswald nods. “*Well*, madam!”

“And let his *knights* have colder looks among you, no matter what grows of it! Advise your fellows so. From hence I would *breed occasions*—and I *shall*, so that I may *speak!* I’ll write straight to my sister to hold *my* very course.

“Prepare for dinner.”

The pompous steward—accoutered, as always, in strict accord with the latest fashion—bows. As he goes to the pantry, he looks forward to the large luncheon—to chafing the former monarch and his burdensome retinue of disorderly knights.

### Chapter Three Discord

Disguised as a sunburned country gentleman who has fallen on hard times—Kent’s distinctively full, wide beard is now pointed, his bushy mustache trim—the earl has been left to wait in a rear corridor of the Duke of Albany’s palace.

*If but as well I borrow other accents, that can my speech deface, my good intent may carry itself through to that full issue for which I razed my likeness.*

*Now, banished Kent, if thou canst serve where thou dost stand condemnèd, so may it come that thy master, whom thou lovest, shall find thee full of labours.*

A cornet blares as Lear enters at the back of the mansion, noisily accompanied by a dozen boisterous knights and several attendants, who carry game the hunters have killed to the pantry.

“Let me not *wait a jot* for *dinner!*” orders Lear brusquely. “Go get it ready!” A knight hurries away to demand immediate serving of the day’s largest meal. The former king sees the stranger.

“How now! What art thou?”

“A man, sir.”

“What dost thou profess? What wouldst thou with us?”

“I do profess to be no less than I seem, to serve him truly who will put me in trust, to love him that is honest, to converse with him that is wise and says little, to fear Judgment, to fight when I cannot choose, and”—he raises an eyebrow in masculine disdain—“to *eat no fish!*”

Lear laughs knowingly. “What art thou?”

“A very honest-hearted fellow, and as poor as the king.”

Lear chuckles. “If thou be as poor for a *subject* as he is for a king, thou art poor *enough!* What wouldst thou?”

“Service.”

“Who wouldst thou serve?”

“You.”

Lear frowns. “Dost thou know me, fellow?”

“No, sir; but you have that in your countenance which I would fain call master.”

“What’s that?”

“Authority.”

“What services canst thou do?”

“I can keep honest counsel, ride, run, mar a curious tale in telling it, and deliver a plain message bluntly. That which ordinary men are fit for, I am qualified in; and the best of me is diligence.”

“How old art thou?”

“Not so young, sir, as to love a woman for *singing*, nor so old to *dote* on her for *anything*. I have years on my back forty-eight.”

Lear turns toward the corridor. “Follow me; thou shalt *serve* me; if I like thee no worse *after* dinner, I will not part from thee—yet. *Dinner, ho, dinner!*” he shouts. “Where’s my knave?” An attendant moves forward and bows. “*My fool!*—go, you, and call my fool hither!” The man bows and hurries away.

Lear sees Oswald pass by on his way from the pantry to the dining hall. “You, *you*, sirrah, where’s my daughter?”

Oswald nods without pausing—only mutters, in passing. “So please you.”

Lear is surprised—and peeved by the slight. “What says the fellow there? *Call the clotpoll back!*” he tells a knight, who bows and hastens after Oswald. “Where’s my *fool, ho?* I think the world’s *asleep!*” he grumbles. The knight returns. “How now? Where’s that mongrel?”

“He says, my lord, your daughter is... not well,” the knight reports.

“Why came not the slave *back to me* when I called him?”

“Sir, he answered me, in the roundest manner, he *would* not!”

Lear is astounded: “*He would not!*”

“My lord, I know not what the matter is,” says the knight, “but, to my judgment, Your Highness is not entertained with that ceremonious affection as you were wont! There’s as great abatement of kindness in the *general* dependants as appears in the *duke himself*—and in your *daughter!*”

“*Hmh*. Sayest thou so?”

The knight, mindful of the old nobleman’s fiery temper, is quickly conciliatory. “I beseech you, pardon me, my lord, if I be *mistaken*; for my *duty* cannot be silent when I think Your Highness wronged.”

“Thou but rememberest me of mine own conception,” says Lear. “I have perceived a most faint *neglect* of late; which I have rather blamed as mine own jealous curiosity than as a very pretence and *purpose* of unkindness. I will look further into’t.

“But where’s my *fool?* I have not seen him this *two days!*”

The young knight takes another risk—mentioning Cordelia: “Since my young lady’s going into France, sir, the fool hath much pined away.”

“No more of *that!* I have noted it well,” says Lear, frowning. “Go you and tell my daughter I would speak with her,” he directs the knight. “Go *you,*” he tells another, “and *call hither* my fool!” Both gentlemen leave on their errands.

At the far doors, Oswald can be seen giving instructions to a kitchen servant.

Lear calls the steward. “Oh, *you* sir!—*you!* Come you hither, sir!” Oswald approaches him slowly. “Who am *I,* sir?”

Says Oswald casually, “My lady’s father”—a very insolent reply.

Lear erupts: “‘*My lady’s father!*’ *You’re* my lord’s *knave,* you *whoreson dog!*—you *slave!*—you *cur!*”

Oswald is impudent: “I beseech your pardon, I am *none* of those, my lord!” he says haughtily.

“Do you bandy *looks* with *me,* you rascal?” growls Lear, cuffing him.

“*I’ll not be struck,* my lord!” cries Oswald, backing away.

Kent kicks Oswald’s feet out from under him. “Nor *tripped* neither!” he growls, as the steward falls into a heap, “you base foot-ball player!”—street urchin.

Lear laughs. “I thank thee, fellow! Servest thou me, and I’ll love thee!”

Kent hauls the major-domo up by the coat collar. “Come, sir, arise! *Away!* I’ll teach you *differences!* *Away, away!*” Oswald, shaken, gropes for a reply. “If you will measure your lubber’s length again, *tarry....*” warns the earl. “*Only away!*—*go to!*”

“Have you *wisdom?*” he demands, as the man balks. “So!” says Kent, shoving Oswald unceremoniously out the door—with a kick to speed him along.

“Now, my friendly knave, I *thank* thee!” laughs Lear, delighted. “There’s earnest for thy service!” He hands Kent three coins—accepted, unlooked-at, with a bow, just as the jester arrives.

**L**ong a member of Lear’s former court, the wiry fool is still sprightly at sixty. “Let *me* hire him, too! Here’s my coxcomb,” he says, offering Kent his colorful cap, jingling with little bells.

Lear, always eager for diversion, is glad to see his clown. “How now, my pretty knave! How dost thou?”

“Sirrah, you were best take my coxcomb,” the man tells Kent.

“Why, Fool?”

“Why, for taking one’s part who’s *out of favour,*” he says, with a glance at Lear. “Nay, if thou canst not *smile* as the wind shifts, thou’lt catch *cold* shortly!” he cautions Kent. “There, take my coxcomb.”

The earl, now serving as a petty paladin, has already felt the wind’s change. He declines to take the fool’s cap.

“Why, this fellow has *banished two* of’s daughters,” the fool tells Kent, “and did the third a *blessing,* against his will! If thou follow *him,* thou must *needs* wear my coxcomb!

“How now, Nuncle?” he asks Lear, affecting a child’s hearing of “an uncle” as *a nuncle.*

“Would I had *two* coxcombs, and two *daughters!*”

“Why, my boy?”

“If I gave them *all my living,* I’d *keep* my coxcombs, myself!” He offers the fool’s cap to Lear. “There’s mine; *beg* another from *thy* daughters.”

Lear, pained, frowns. “Take *heed,* sirrah!—*the whip!*” he warns.

“*Truth’s* a dog that must to *kennel,*” the fool observes to Kent. “It must be *whipped out,* while Lady, the brach, may stand by the fire and *stink!*”—when a bitch is favored.

Lear winces. “A pestilent gall to me!”

“Sirrah, I’ll teach thee a *speech!*” the fool offers Kent.

“Do.”

“Mark it, Nuncle:

‘*Have* more than thou showest,  
*Speak* less than thou knowest,

*Lend* less than thou owest,  
*Ride* more than thou goest,  
*Learn* more than thou trowest,  
*Set* less than thou throwest!  
Leave thy *drink* and thy *whore*,  
And keep *in-a-door*,  
And thou shalt have *more*  
Than two tens to a score!”

Kent has heard many such maxims. “This is nothing, Fool.”

The fool shrugs. “Then ’tis like the breath of an unfee’d lawyer: you gave me nothing *for’t!*”  
He asks the king. “Can you make no *use* of nothing, Nuncle?”

“Why, no, boy,” Lear replies. He adds, sadly, “Nothing can be made out of nothing.”

The fool wags his head. “Prithee, *tell* him!—so much the *rent* of his *land* comes to!” he says to Kent. “He will not *believe* a fool.”

“A *bitter* fool!” chides Lear.

The fool challenges: “Dost thou know the difference, my boy, between a bitter fool and a *sweet* fool?”

“No, lad,” sighs Lear, “teach me.”

“That lord who counselled thee to *give away thy land*... come, place him here by me.” No one moves. “Do *thou* for him stand.” Lear steps toward him. “The sweet and bitter fools will presently appear—the one in *motley* here, the *other* found out *there!*”

Lear shoves him away. “Dost thou call me *fool*, boy?”

“All thine *other* titles thou hast given away! *That* thou wast born with.”

Says Kent, “This is perfectly foolish, my lord!”

“*No*, i’ faith!” protests the fool. “Lords and great men will not *let* me perfect it: if I had a *monopoly* out, they would have *part* of’t!”—tax it. “And *ladies*, too!—they will not let me have all fool to myself—they’ll be *snatching!*”

The fool sees Lear brighten, enjoying the crude play on words. “Give me an egg, Nuncle, and I’ll give thee *two crowns!*”

That’s too much money to pay for an egg. “*What* two crowns”—which dominions—“shall they be?”

“Why, after I have cut it i’ the middle and *eaten up the egg*, the two crowns of the *shell!*”

“When thou clovest thy crown i’ the middle and *gavest away both parts*, thou hadst little wit in thy *bald* crown as when thou gavest thy *golden* one away!

“Thou *borest* thine *ass!*—on thy *back*, o’er the *dirt!*”

The fool quickly holds up a palm to bar objection, under his profession’s privilege. “If I speak like *myself* in this, let *him* be whipped that first finds it so!”—thinks it foolish. He sings:

“*Fools ne’er had less wit in any year,*  
*For wise men are now grown foppish!*  
*They know not how their wits to wear,*  
*Their manners are so ape-ish!*”

“When were you wont to be so full of *song*, sirrah?” demands Lear.

“I have used it, Nuncle, ever since thou madest thy daughters thy *mothers*. For when thou gavest them the *rod*, and put down thine own *breeches*...” He sings:

“*Then they for sudden joy did weep,*  
*And I for sorrow sung,*  
*That such a king should play Bo Peep,*  
*And go the fools among!*”

He regards Lear gravely. “Prithee, Nuncle, employ a *schoolmaster* who can teach thy fool to *lie!* I would fain learn to lie.”

“If you lie, sirrah, we’ll have you whipped.”

The fool laughs—mirthlessly. “I marvel what kin thou and thy daughters are: they’ll have me whipped for speaking *true*; thou’lt have me whipped for *lying*—and sometimes I am whipped for holding my peace!

“I had rather be *any* kind o’ thing than a *fool*. And yet I would not be *thee*, Nuncle: thou hast pared thy wit on both sides, and left nothing i’ the middle!”

He sees Goneril. “Here comes one o’ the parings.”

“How now, daughter!” says Lear jovially as she approaches, anger and resentment showing in her expression. “What makes *that* frontlet on? Methinks you are *too much* of late i’ the *frown!*”

The fool shakes his head, jangling his cap-bells. “Thou wast a pretty fellow when thou hadst no *need* to care about her frowning! Now thou art an O without a figure!”—a supernumerary zero. “*I* am better than thou art now: I am a fool—thou art *nothing*.”

He sees the king’s fierce countenance. “Yes, forsooth, I will hold my tongue!—so your face bids me, though you say *nothing*.”

“*Mum, mum*. He that keeps nor crust nor crumb, wary of *all* shall want for *some!*” He tips his head toward Lear. “That’s a *shelled* peascod”—an empty husk; with a play on *codpiece*, implying impotence.

Goneril stands before Lear, fuming. “Sir, not only this, your ill-licensed *fool*, but *other* of your insolent retinue do hourly *carp* and *quarrel*, breaking forth in *rank* and not-to-be endured *riots!*”

“I had *thought*, sir, by making this *well known* unto you, to have found a safe *redress*; but now I grow fearful, by what *you yourself* of late have spoken and done, that you *protect* this course, and *put it on* by your *allowance!*”

Lear turns away, annoyed.

“If you should do so,” the lady continues, “that *fault* would not ’scape *censure*, nor the *redresses* sleep which, in tendering a *wholesome* weal that else were *shame*, might in their working do you *offence*—which *necessity* will then call *discreet proceeding!*”

He pointedly ignores her.

Says the fool, “For, you trow, Nuncle, the *hedge-sparrow* fed the cuckoo so long that she’s had her head bit off by its young! So *out* went the candle—and *we* were left *darkling!*”

Lear, facing her, is sarcastic: “Are you our daughter?”

“Come, sir, I would you would make *good* use of that wisdom whereof I know you are fraught, and put away these dispositions that of late transform you from what you rightly are.”

“May not an *ass* know when the cart draws the horse?” murmurs the fool. Lear throws him a scowl. “*Whoop*, Jug!”—a name for an ass. “*I* love thee....”

“Doth any here *know* me?” demands the proud lord. “*This* is not Lear,” he says, closing his eyes, and affecting a stagger. “Doth *Lear* walk thus? *Speak* thus?” He gropes in the air. “Where are his eyes? Either his motion weakens or his discernings are lethargied....” He feigns awakening—“*Hah!* ’Tis not *so!*”

He peers around, as if puzzled. “Who is it that can tell me *who I am?*” he asks imperiously.

- “Lear’s *shadow*,” murmurs the fool.

“I would *learn* that,” Lear tells her, his tone severe, “for, by the marks of sovereignty, knowledge, and reason, I should be persuaded *I had daughters!*”

- “Whom thou will make an *obedient* father.”

Lear pretends confusion: “*Your name*, fair gentlewoman?”

Goneril rejects the sarcasm. “*This* simulation, sir, is much o’ the savour of your *other* new pranks! I do beseech you to understand my purposes *aright!* As you are old and reverent, you should be *wise!*”

“Here do you keep a *hundred* knights and squires—men so *disordered*, so *debauched* and bold, that this our *court*, infected with *their* manners, shows like a *riotous inn!*—*epicurism* and *lust* make it more like a *tavern* or a *brothel* than a graced *palace!* The *shame itself* doth speak for instant remedy!

“Then be desired—by she that else will *take* the thing she begs!—a little to *disquantity* your train! The remainder still depending should be such men as may be sort with *your age*, and *know* themselves—and you.”

“*Darkness and devils!*” yells Lear—instantly furious. “*Saddle my horses!*—call my train together!” He glares at Goneril. “Degenerate *bastard*, I’ll not trouble *thee!*—yet have I left a *daughter!*”

“You *strike my people*,” says Goneril angrily, “and your *disorderly rabble* make *servants* of their *bettors!*” She looks to her husband for confirmation as he rushes in, alarmed by the outcry.

“*Woe*, who repents *too late!*” mutters Lear. “Oh, sir, are *you* come? Is it *your* will? *Speak*, sir!” With a brusque gesture he commands his knights: “Prepare my horses!”

He scowls at Goneril. “*Ingratitude*, thou marble-hearted *fiend*, more hideous when thou show’st thee in a *child* than a *sea-monster!*”

The Duke of Albany entreats: “Pray, sir, *be patient!*”

“*Detested hawk!* Thou *liest!*” shouts Lear at Goneril. “My train are men of *choice and rarest parts*, who all particulars of *duty* know, and in the most exact regard *support* the worship of their names!

“O *most small* fault, how ugly didst thou in *Cordelia* show, that like an *engine*”—hoisting tackle—“wrenchèd the frame of my *nature* from the fixèd place, drew from the heart all *love*, and added to the *gall!*”

He pounds both fists against his head. “O Lear, Lear, *Lear!* *Beat* at this gate that let thy folly *in* and thy dear *judgment* out!”

He motions to the several knights still there with him: “Go, *go*, my people!” They bow and leave the hall, headed for the stable.

Albany is perturbed. “My lord, I am as *guiltless* as I am ignorant of what hath *moved* you!”

“It may be so, my lord,” says Lear, brushing past him. “Hear, *Nature*, hear!—dear goddess, *hear!*” he calls. “*Suspend* thy purpose, if thou didst intend to make this creature”—Goneril—“*fruitful!* Into her womb convey *sterility!* *Dry up* in her the organs of *increase*, and from her derogated body *never* spring a babe to honour her!

“If she *must* teem, create in her a child of *spleen!*—that it may live and be a *thwart*, *disnatured torment* to her! Let it *stamp wrinkles* in her brow of youth, with cadent *tears* fret *channels* in her cheeks!—turn all her mother’s pains and beneficence to *laughter* and *contempt!*—so that *she* may feel how sharper than a serpent’s tooth it is to have a *thankless child!*”

“Away, *away!*” he calls to his knights; their squires are already carrying gear to carts outside as he stalks angrily from the hall.

**N**ow, *gods* that we adore, whereof comes *this?*” gasps Albany.

Goneril waves him to silence. “Never afflict yourself to know the cause, but let his disposition have that scope that *dotage* gives it!” She believes Lear’s extravagant temper will soon disable him.

Lear returns, beside himself with rage. “*What?*—*fifty* of my followers at a clap! Within a fortnight!” He has learned more of the *little disquantity* already effected by Goneril. Kent and the fool follow him in.

“What’s the *matter*, sir?” pleads Albany.

“I’ll tell thee!” He shouts at Goneril: “Life and *death!* I am *ashamed* that thou hast power to shake my manhood thus!—that these hot *tears*, which break from me perforce, should make thee *worth* them! *Blasts and fogs upon thee!* The untented *woundings* of a *father’s curse* pierce every sense about thee!

“Old fond eyes, bewep this cause *again* and I’ll *pluck ye out!*—cast you, with the waters that you lose, to temper *clay!*”

“Yea, it is come to *this?*”



“*Let* is be so!—yet have I left a daughter who, I am sure, is *kind* and *comforting!*” He glares at Goneril. “When *she* shall hear this of thee, with her *nails* she’ll *flay* thy wolvisish visage!

“Thou shalt find that I’ll *resume* the shape which thou dost think I have cast off forever!” With a gloved hand he brushes away tears. “Thou *shalt*, I warrant thee!”

As Lear stamps away, Kent, incensed by the humiliation, flexes his right hand—clearly loath to leave with his sword still sheathed. Scowling at the unarmed lord of the castle and his lady, he follows her father.

“Do you mark that, my lord?” says she, disgusted.

Albany begins, “I cannot be so partial, Goneril, to the great love I bear *you*—”

She cuts him off sharply: “Pray you, content. *What?—Oswald, ho!*”

Goneril looks at the man in motley, who is listening. “*You*, sir, more *knave* than fool, after your master!” she orders.

“*Nuncle Lear, Nuncle Lear*, tarry and take the fool with thee!” he cries in mock panic. At the doors, he rhymes: “A fox, when one has caught her—and even such a *daughter*—should sure to the slaughter, if my *cap* would buy a *halter!* So the fool follows after!” He runs.

Goneril, her face a mask of anger, watches from the doors as Lear and his followers prepare to ride. “This man hath had *good* counsel!

“*A hundred knights!*” Her sarcasm is bitter: “’Tis *politic* and *safe* to let him keep at point a hundred knights!—yes, so that, on every dream, each buzz, each fancy, each complaint, dislike, he may enguard his *dotage* with their powers, and hold our lives in mercy!

“*Oswald*, I say!” she calls again impatiently.

“Well, you may fear *too far*....” says Albany.

“Safer than *trust* too far! Let me ever *take away* the harms I fear, not always fear to be *taken!*”

“I know his heart. What he hath uttered I have writ my sister; if she sustain him and his knights, when I have showed the unfitness—” The steward hurries into the hall with the newest missive in hand. “How now, Oswald! What?—have you writ that letter to my sister?”

“Yes, madam!”

“Take you some company, and away to horse! Inform her fully of *my* particular fear, and thereto add such reasons of your own as may compact it more. Get you gone!—and hasten your return!”

Oswald bows and hurries away.

She holds up a hand, silencing Albany. “No, *no*, my lord!—under pardon, I condemn this milky *gentleness* in your course of thought!” *You are yet much more taskèd for want of wisdom than praised for harmful mildness!*

Albany muses. “How far your eyes may pierce I can not tell. Striving to better, oft we mar what’s well.”

But Goneril is already walking away. “Nay, then ....”

“Well, well, the event,” says Albany, resigned; he will wait and see.

## Chapter Four Alienation

Lear’s rootless retinue is filling trunks and bags, quickly loading wagons and packhorses for the journey south. From the stone-paved terrace beside the duke’s castle, Lear sends a message ahead to Lady Regan at her home in Cornwall.

“Before you go to Gloucester with *these* letters,” he tells Kent, “acquaint my daughter no further with anything you know than comes from her demand out of her letter. If your diligence be not speedy, I shall be there afore you!” He will stop to visit Gloucester on his way to Cornwall.

“I will not sleep, my lord, till I have delivered your letters!” Kent mounts his roan, and rides away.

The patriarch is eager to leave here—to reach the reassuring western haven, and the support of his loyal daughter.

Watching him pace, hands clasped behind him, the fool asks: “If a man’s brain were in’s heels, were’t not in danger of kibes?”—sores on cold feet, shoeless at home.

“Aye, boy.”

“Then, I prithee, be *merry!*—*thy* wit shall ne’er go slip-shod!” Lear has no home. “Shalt see thy other daughter will *use thee kindly*,” says the fool—with irony: *in kind*, turn him out, as her sister did here. “For though she’s as like this as a *crab*’s like an *apple*, yet I can tell what I can *tell*.”

“Why, what canst thou tell, my boy?”

“She will *taste* as like to this as a *crab* does to a *crab!*”—another crabapple. Before Lear can argue, the fool asks: “Canst thou tell why one’s *nose* stands i’ the middle on’s face...?”

“No.”

“Why, to keep one’s *eyes* on either side of ’s nose—so that what a man cannot *smell out*, he may *spy into!*”

But Lear is paying no heed; he grows sadly pensive—increasingly, a common occurrence. “I did her wrong....” He stands, ruminating.

“Canst tell how an oyster makes his shell?”

“No.”

“Nor I neither. But I can tell why a snail has a *house*.”

“Why?”

“Why, to put his *head* in!—not to *give it away* to his daughters, and leave his horns without a case!”

“I will forget my nature!” warns Lear, frowning. He returns, further troubled, to his thoughts. He muses. “So *kind* a father....”

He tries to shake off the growing worry and doubt. “Be my *horses* ready?”

“Thy *asses* are gone about ’em.” The fool tries a riddle: “The reason why the seven stars”—the cluster of Pleiades, once sisters, but transformed, before becoming stars, into game-birds—“are no more than *seven* is a pretty reason.”

Lear has heard it; he answers dully. “Because they were not eight”—*not ate*.

“Yes indeed! Thou wouldst make a good *fool!*” But he perceives that Lear’s mind is drifting.

The nobleman thinks of his abandoned reign: “...to *take* ’t again *perforce!*” He studies his long boots. “Monster *ingratitude!*”

The fool regards him. “If thou *wert* my fool, Nuncle, I’d have thee beaten for being *old* before thy *time*.”

“How’s that?”

“Thou shouldst not have been old till thou hadst been wise,” says the fool softly.

Lear is distracted. “Oh, let me not be mad—not *mad!*” He looks skyward and moans. “Sweet Heaven, keep me in *temper!* I would not be mad!”

He looks down as a gentleman comes to them. “How now? Are the horses ready?”

“Ready, my lord.”

“Come, boy.” Lear goes to his steed.

As the fool glances back, he sees haughty Goneril watching the huge retinue of armed riders, their attendants, wagons, and carts all moving away south in dusty defile. She looks pleased; now they’re Regan’s burden.

The fool remembers a stock line, wry and ribald: “She that’s a maid now, and laughs at my departure, shall not be a maid long, unless *things* be cut *shorter!*”

*Made now, not a-made long*, he thinks, following after Lear.

At Gloucester's castle that night, Edmund is approached outside his chambers by the earl's elderly retainer. "Save thee, Curan."

"And you, sir. I have been with your father, and given him notice that the Duke of Cornwall and Regan, his duchess, will be here with him this night."

"How comes that?"

"Nay, I know not." Curan leans closer; his voice is reedy. "You have heard of the news abroad? I mean the whispered ones; for they are yet but ear-kissing arguments...."

"No. I pray you, what are they?"

"Have you heard of no likely wars toward, 'twixt the Dukes of Cornwall and Albany?"

"Not a word."

Curan shrugs his slender shoulders. "You *may* do, then, in time. Fare you well, sir." He shuffles away to attend to his household duties.

*The duke be here tonight? The better, thinks Edmund. Best! This weaves itself perforce into my business.*

*My father hath set guard to take my brother; and I have something of a queasy question which I must act. Briefness and Fortune, work!* He steps into his room and calls, softly. "Brother, a word! *Descend*, Brother, I say!"

Edgar climbs down from his concealment in the loft. Edmund hurries him out into the dim corridor—where he expects the earl to arrive, as arranged, soon.

"My father *watches*," warns Edmund. "Oh, sir, *fly* this place!—intelligence is given where you are hid! You have *now* the good advantage of the *night*!"

"Have you not spoken 'gainst the Duke of Cornwall?—he's coming *hither*!—*now*, i' the night, in *haste*!—and Regan with him! Have you nothing said about his part 'gainst the Duke of Albany? Advise yourself," he warns gravely.

"I am *sure* on't!" insists Edgar earnestly. "Not a word!"

Edmund hushes him; there are footfalls up the passage. "I hear thy father coming! Pardon me—in *cunning* I must draw my sword upon you! Draw—seem to *defend* yourself! Now acquit you well!" he urges.

Alarmed, Edgar raises his sword tentatively, and Edmund's clashes against it loudly.

"Yield!" cries Edmund. "Come before my father!" He calls to those approaching: "*Light, ho, here!*"

"*Fly*, brother!" he whispers to Edgar. He turns, calling again: "Torches, *torches!*" Edgar nods and dashes to the far door; finding no one outside to hinder him, he hurries away, fearfully, into the night. "So, farewell," mutters Edmund.

*Some blood drawn on me would beget opinion of my more fierce endeavour*, he thinks. He makes a small cut on his left arm with the blade. *I have seen drunkards do more than this in sport!*

"Father, *father!*" Staggering from his door, he calls, "Stop, *stop!*" as Gloucester and four servants rush toward him with torches. "No help?" moans Edmund weakly, leaning against the stone wall.

Gloucester peers around; the nearby torchlight makes the space seem even darker. "Now, Edmund, where is the villain?"

"Here stood he in the dark, his sharp sword out!" gasps Edmund, "mumbling wicked *charms*, conjuring the *moon* to stand auspicious witness—"

"But where *is* he?" demands Gloucester.

Edmund seems shaken. "*Look*, sir, I *bleed!*"

Gloucester demands angrily, "*Where is* the villain, Edmund?"

He points. "Fled this way, sir! When by no means could he—"

"*Pursue* him, *ho!*" commands Gloucester. "*Go, after,*" he orders the others, taking a torch from one as they run. "By no means' what?"

“Persuade me to the *murder* of Your Lordship!” says Edmund, “for that I told him the revenging *gods* did *all their thunders* bend ’gainst *parricides!*—spoke how the *child* was bound to the father with a *strong* and *manifold* bond!

“Sir, in fine, seeing how loathly *opposite* I stood to his unnatural purpose, in a fell motion with his barèd sword he charged home at my unprotected body!—*lanced mine arm!*”

“But when he saw my *best spirits*—*rouse*d to the encounter, *bold* in the quarrel’s *right!*—then gasted by the *alarmèd noise* I made, full suddenly he *fled!*”

“Let him fly *far!*” growls Gloucester. “Not in *this* land shall he remain uncaught!—and *found, dispatched!*”—executed. “The noble duke my master, my worthy arch and patron, comes tonight; by his authority I will *proclaim it:* he who finds him shall deserve our *thanks* for bringing the murderous coward *to the stake;* he that *conceals* him, *death!*”

“When I dissuaded him from his intent, but found him pight to *do it,*” says Edmund, “with worse speech I threatened to *reveal* him!

“He replied, ‘*Thou*, unpossessing bastard? If *I* would stand against thee, dost thou think the reposal of any trust, virtue or worth in *thee* would make thy words *faithèd?* *No!* What I should *deny*—as *this* I would!—aye, though thou didst produce my very character,”—written words, “I’d turn it all to *thy* suggestion, plot, and damnèd *practise!*”

“And thou must make a *dullard* of the *world,* if they’re not to think that *profits* of my *death* were very pregnant and potent spurs to make thee *seek it!*”

“Strong and fastened *villain!* Would he deny his letter?” cries Gloucester. “*I* never begot him!” he mutters, abjuring his elder son.

They hear, from outside the castle but within its palisade near the keep, the call of horns. “Hark!—the duke’s trumpets!” says the earl. “I know not why he comes.” Gloucester returns to the pursuit of Edgar. “All *ports* I’ll bar! The villain shall not ’scape; the duke must grant me that! Besides, his *picture* I will send far and near, so that *all the kingdom* may have the due note of him!”

He clasps Edmund’s shoulder. “And of *my land,* loyal and natural boy, I’ll work the means to make *thee* capable!”

Edmund, cradling his wounded arm so as to show all of the red stain, bows dutifully, and they walk to the entrance hall.

With attendants following, the Duke of Cornwall and his lady have entered the castle. “How now, my noble friend!” he says, coming to Gloucester. “Since I came hither—I can call it but *now*—I have heard *strange news!*”

“If it be true, all *vengeance* which can pursue the offender comes *too short!*” says Regan. “How dost my lord?”

“Oh, madam, my old heart is cracked, it’s *cracked!*” groans Gloucester.

“What?—did my father’s godson seek your *life?*” asks Regan, attending to her own agenda. “He whom my *father* named—your *Edgar?*”

Gloucester nods. “Oh, lady, lady, shame would have it *hid!*”

“Was he not *companion* with the *riotous knights* that tend upon my father?” asks Regan.

“I know not, madam,” says Gloucester. “‘Tis too *bad,* too *bad!*”

Edmund provides the desired false answer. “Yes, madam, he *was* of that consort!”

“No marvel, then, that he were *ill affected,*” she tells him. “‘Tis *they* have put him on the old man’s death, to have the expense and wasting of his revenues! I have this present evening from my *sister* been *well informed* of them!—and with such cautions that, if they come to sojourn at my house, I’ll not *be* there!”

Cornwall would appease her: “Nor *I,* assure thee, Regan! Edmund, I hear that *you* have shown your father a child-like office!”

“‘Twas my duty, sir,” says Edmund, clutching his injured arm.

“He did *bewray* his practise,” Gloucester tells the duke, “and received this hurt you see, striving to *apprehend* him.”

“Is he pursuèd?” asks Cornwall.

“Aye, my good lord!” says Gloucester.

Cornwall grimly assures the earl, “If he be taken, he shall never more be feared of doing harm! In my strength, make your own purpose how you please.

“As for you, Edmund, whose virtue and obedience doth this instant so much *commend* itself, you shall be *ours*! Natures of such deep trust we shall much need; you we first seize on!”

Edmund bows, wincing. “Sir, I shall serve you *truly*, however else!”

“For him I *thank* Your Grace!” says Gloucester.

Cornwall returns to other concerns. “You know not why we came to visit you—”

“—thus out of season, threading dark-eyed *night*.” Regan takes over. “*Occasions*, noble Gloucester, of some *poise*, wherein we must have use of your advice.

“Our *father*, he hath writ—so hath our *sister*—of differences which *I*, at least, thought it fit to answer *away* from our home. Thus several messengers from hence attend dispatch.

“Our good old *friend*, lay comforts to your bosom, and bestow your needful counsel to our business, which craves the instant use!”

“I serve you, madam,” says Gloucester, bowing deeply. “Your Graces are right welcome!”

## Chapter Five Plain-spoken

Good dawning to thee, friend,” says Oswald, dismounting in the darkness, and approaching the path from Gloucester’s castle down to the stable. “Art of this house?” he asks a man.

“Aye.”

“Where may we set our horses?” He has ridden here with Lord Cornwall’s party.

“In the *mire*!” Kent has again encountered the perfumed messenger who, he knows, took Lady Regan her sister’s latest message denigrating Lear.

Oswald peers around, looking for a stable boy. “Prithee, if thou lovest me, tell me.”

“I love thee *not*!”

“Why, then, I care not for *thee*—”

“If I had thee penned up at home, I would *make* thee have care for me!”

Accustomed to palace life, Oswald is road-weary. He frowns in the still-dim light. “Why dost thou use me thus? I know thee not.”

“Fellow, I know *thee*!”

“What dost thou know me for?” demands the steward.

“A *knave*!—a *rascal*; an eater of *broken meats*,”—others’ garbage, “a base, proud, shallow, beggarly, three-suited, hundred-pound, filthy, worsted-stocking *knave*!” says Kent with disgust, his voice rising in anger. “A *lily-livered, action-taking*”—litigious—“*knave*; a whoreson, *glass-gazing, super-serviceable, finical rogue*; a trunk-inheriting *slave*!—one that wouldst be a *bawd* as a way of good *service*!”

“*And*, art nothing but the *composition* of a knave: *beggar, coward, pandar*, and the son and heir of a *mongrel bitch*!—one whom I will *beat* into *clamorous whining* if thou deniest the *least syllable* of thy addition!”

Oswald backs away, staring. “Why, what a monstrous fellow art thou, thus to rail on one that is neither known to thee nor knows thee!”

“What a *brazen-faced varlet* art *thou* to *deny* thou knowest me!” cries Kent. “Is it *two days* ago since I *tripped up thy heels* and *beat* thee before the king? *Draw*, you *rogue*!—for, though it be night, yet the *moon* shines; I’ll make a *soy o’* the moonshine of you!

“*Draw*, you *whoreson, cullionly barber-monger, draw*!” He unsheathes his sword.

“Away!” cries Oswald. “I’ll have nothing to do with thee!”

“Draw, you rascal! You come with letters *against the king*—take *Vanity the puppet*’s part against the *royalty* of her father! *Draw*, you rogue, or I’ll *carbonado* your *shanks!*”—score them, as if for grilling. “*Draw*, you rascal! *Come your ways!*”

“*Help, ho!*” screams Oswald, “*Murder! Help!*”

“*Strike*, you slave! *Stand*, rogue, *stand!*” cries Kent, smacking Oswald about the head with his left hand. “You *tidy slave*, *strike!*”

“*Help, ho! Murder! Murder!*”

His cries have brought Gloucester and his guests out from the castle. Edmund, his sword drawn, rushes forward, followed by several servants. “*How now! What’s the matter?*” he demands.

Kent turns to him, glaring. “With *you*, goodman boy, an you please!” He raises his sword. “Come, I’ll flesh ye!—*come on*, young master!”

Edmund steps forward and makes a thrust at him; Kent counters it, forcing down the younger man’s blade with his own.

“*Weapons?*” cries the angry host. “*Arms! What’s the matter* here?”

“*Keep peace*, upon your *lives!*” commands Lord Cornwall. “He *dies* who strikes again! What *is* the matter?”

Regan nods toward Oswald and Kent. “The messengers from our sister and the king,” she tells her husband.

“What is your difference?” asks Cornwall. “Speak!”

“I am scarce in *breath*, my lord!” gasps cowering Oswald, plucking his costly plumed hat up from the ground.

“No marvel, you have so *bestirred* your *valour!*” says Kent contemptuously. “You cowardly *rascal*, Nature disclaims thee; a *tailor* made thee!”

Cornwall stares at Lear’s messenger. “Thou art a strange fellow! A *tailor* make a man?”

“Aye, a tailor, sir,” Kent replies. “A stone-cutter or painter could not have made him *so ill*, though he had been but two hours at the trade!”

Cornwall turns to the steward. “Speak *you*; how grew your quarrel?”

“This ancient ruffian, sir, whose life I have spared at suit of his grey beard—”

“*Thou whoreson zed!*” cries Kent, “thou *unnecessary letter!* My lord, if you will give me leave, I will tread this unbolted villain into *mortar*, and daub the wall of a *jakes*”—outhouse—“with him! *Spare my grey beard*, you wagtail?”

“*Peace*, sirrah!” insists Cornwall, annoyed. “You beastly knave, know you no reverence?”

“Yes, sir,” says the erstwhile earl, “but anger hath a *privilege!*”

“Why art thou *angry?*”

“That such a slave as this, who wears no *honesty*, should wear a *sword!*” says Kent hotly. “Such smiling rogues as these, like *rats* oft *bite a-twain* the holy cords which are too intrinsic to *unloose!*—encourage every passion that *rebels* in the natures of their lords!—bring *oil* to *fire*, *snow* to their *colder* moods!—*renege* and *affirm*, turning *their* halcyon beaks with every varying *gale* of their masters—knowing, like *dogs*, nought but *following!*”

“A *plague* upon your epileptic visage!” he shouts furiously at now-protected Oswald. “*Smile* you my speeches, as if I were a fool? *Goose*, if I had you upon Sarum plain, I’d drive ye *cackling* home!—you *chameleon!*”

Cornwall raises a hand for restraint. “Why, art thou *mad*, old fellow?”

Gloucester, hoping to avoid a further diatribe, asks Kent, “How fell you out? Say that.”

“No contraries hold more antipathy than *I* and such a *knave!*” says Kent.

“Why dost thou call him a knave?” demands Cornwall impatiently. “What’s his *offence?*”

“His countenance pleases me not,” says Kent dryly.

The flippant reply irks the duke. “No more, perchance, does *mine*—nor his, nor hers!”

Kent looks them over. “Sir, ’tis my occupation to be plain; I *have* seen better faces in my time than stands on any shoulder that I see before me at this instant.”

Cornwall shakes his head. “This is some fellow who, having been praised for bluntness, doth affect a *saucy roughness*, and strains the garb quite from its nature!” The nobleman turns sarcastic: “*He* cannot flatter, he!—in *honest* mind, *he* must speak *truth*—if they will *take* it so; if not, he’s ‘*plain!*’

“These kinds of knave I know, who in *this* plainness harbour more *craft* and more *corrupt ends* than twenty silly, *ducking* servants that stretch *their* duties precisely!”

Oswald is prudently silent.

Kent responds dryly: “Sir, in good sooth, in sincere verity, under the allowance of your great aspect, whose influence, like the wreath of radiant fire on flickering Phoebus’ front—”

Cornwall interrupts. “What mean’st by this?”

“To go out of *my dialect*, which you discommend so much! I know, sir, I am no *flatterer!* He that beguiled you with unplain *accent* was a plain *knave!*—which for my part *I will not be*, though I should win your displeasure, entreating me to ‘t!”

Cornwall tries again with Oswald. “What was the offence you gave him?”

“I never gave him *any!*” whines the steward. “It pleased the king his master very late to *strike* at me, upon his *misconstruction*—when *he*, conjunct with *flattering* that displeasure, *tripped me from behind!* I being *down*, *insulted*, railed at and *put upon*, *he*—such a deal of *man*, that *worthiest* he!—got praises of the king for himself by attempting one who was *subdued!*

“And, in the fleshment of this dread exploit, drew on me *here again!*”

Kent scoffs: “None of these rogues and cowards but *Ajax* is their *fool!*”

Cornwall has heard enough. “Fetch forth the stocks!” he orders Gloucester’s attendants. “You stubborn, ancient *knave*, you irreverent *braggart*, we’ll teach you—”

“Sir, I am too old to learn,” Kent retorts. “Call not your stocks for *me*; I serve *the king*, on whose employment I was sent to you. You shall do small respect, show too bold malice against the grace and person of my master, stocking *his messenger.*”

At that, the servants pause, but the duke waves them on. “Fetch forth the stocks! As I have life and honour, *there* shall he sit till *noon!*”

“Till noon?” says Regan. “Till *night*, my lord—and *all* night, too!”

Kent is unafraid of the stocks, but the affront to Lear stuns him. “Why, madam, if I were your father’s *dog*, you should not use me so!”

“Sir, you being his *knave*, I will,” she replies.

Cornwall regards Kent with disdain. “This is a fellow of the self-same colour our sister-in-law speaks of! Come, bring away the stocks!” The wood-frame seat, with spaces in which a prisoner’s legs can be locked behind a brace, is carried from the castle.

“Let me beseech Your Grace not to do so!” pleads Gloucester, disconcerted. “His fault *is* much, and the good king his *master* will check him for ‘t! Your purposed low correction is such as basest and condemnèd’st wretches are punished with for *pilferings* and most *common* trespasses! The king must take it ill that he’s so slightly valued in his messenger!—would not have him thus restrained....”

Cornwall shows no concern. “I’ll answer that.”

“My *sister* may receive it *worse* much more,” says Regan sharply, “to have her gentleman abused, assaulted, for following *her* affairs!”

“Put in his legs,” she orders.

Kent is locked, seated, in the stocks.

“Come, my good lord, away,” says Regan. They head into the castle.

Gloucester lingers for a moment. “I am sorry for thee, friend,” he tells Kent. “’Tis the duke’s pleasure, whose disposition, all the world well knows, will not be slowed nor stopped! I’ll entreat for thee....”

“Pray, do not, sir,” says Kent mildly. “I have travelled hard and watchèd long; some time I shall *sleep* out, the rest I’ll whistle.” He chuckles, wagging his captive feet. “A good man’s

fortune may *grow out at heels!*”—a jest on a saying commending service. “God give you good morrow!”

Gloucester pats his shoulder kindly, but he is still worried. “The duke’s to *blame* in this; ’twill be ill taken!” He goes inside.

Kent, enjoys that prospect—and the sunrise. He closes his eyes and smiles into the golden light. *Good king, thou must approve the common saw: ‘Out of heaven’s benediction thou comest to the warm sun.’ Approach, thou beacon to this under-globe, so that by thy comfortable beams I may peruse this letter.*

*Nothing, almost, sees miracles but misery!*

He pulls a folded paper from his coat pocket.

*I know ’tis from Cordelia, who hath most fortunately been informed of my obscured course, and—he reads—‘shall find time from this enormous state to seek to give losses their remedies!’*

He puts away her letter from France, and yawns. *All weary and o’erwatchèd, take vantage, heavy eyes, not to behold this shameful lodging!*

*Fortune, good night! Smile once more; turn thy wheel!*

And with that, he leans back and falls fast asleep.

**H**idden, for now, deep within an ancient midland forest, the fugitive Edgar has so far eluded capture. *I heard myself proclaimed!—and happily escaped the hunt in the hollow of a tree!* he remembers, still contending with disbelief.

*No port is free!—no place that guard and most unusual vigilance may not attend my taking!*

*Whiles I may ’scape I will preserve myself—and am bethought to take the basest and most poorest shape that ever penury, in contempt of Man, brought near to beast! My face I’ll grime with filth, blanket my loins, elf all my hair in knots, and with presented nakedness out-face the winds and persecutions of the sky!*

*The country gives me proof and precedent in Bedlam beggars, who, with roaring voices, strike into their numbed and mortified bare arms pins, wooden pricklers, nails, sprigs of rosemary—and with this horrible purpose: from low farms, poor, pelting villages, sheep-cotes, and mills, entice their charity!—sometimes with lunatic bayings, sometimes with prayers.*

*Poor—truly, God!—poor Tom!*

*Yet that’s something; as Edgar I nothing am!*

## Chapter Six Unnatural Hags

**L**ear and his many riders—gentry and attendants, knights with their young squires—have arrived at Gloucester’s estate this morning just as darkening clouds close in. He soon learns that the earl already entertains Lady Regan and the Duke of Cornwall.

“’Tis strange that they should so depart from home and not send back my messenger,” Lear comments, walking toward the castle with the fool and a tall gentleman, now a member of Lear’s company of forty, who was once a courtier.

“As I learned,” the gentleman tells him, “the *night before* there was no purpose in them of this remove.”

Lear frowns, considering that, as they step into the open courtyard behind the wide edifice of stone.

The royal nobleman is surprised to find his emissary sitting, ignominiously, in stocks.

“Hail to thee, noble master!” cries Kent.

“Makest thou this shame thy *pastime?*”

“No, my lord.”



Says the fool, "He wears *cruel garters!* Horses are tied by the heads, dogs and bears by the neck, monkeys by the loins, and men by the *legs*. When a man's over-*lust*y at legs, then he wears *wooden nether-stocks!*"—stockings.

Indignation overwhelms Lear's amusement. "Who's he that hath so much thy place mistook as to set thee here?"

"It is both he and *she*: your son and daughter."

"No."

"Yes."

"No, I say."

"I say *Yea*."

"No, no, they *would* not!"

Kent glances down at the stocks. "Yet they have."

Lear cannot believe what he hears. "By Jupiter, I swear, *No!*"

"By *Juno*,"—Jupiter's wife, "I swear *Aye!*"

"They durst not do't," says Lear, almost to himself. "They could not, *would* not do't—'tis worse than *murder*, to do such violent outrage against *respect!*"

"Resolve me with all modest haste which way, coming from us, thou mightst *deserve*—or they *impose*—this usage!"

The day before, after a long ride on horseback, Kent had reached the western palace and taken Lear's message to Regan and her husband.

Kent replies tersely: "My lord, when at their home I did commend Your Highness' letter to them, ere I was risen from the place that showed my duty *kneeling*, came there a reeking *post*—*stewed* in his haste, half *breathless!*—panting forth salutations from Goneril, his mistress—delivered *letters* which, in spite of the interruption, they immediately *read!*"

Because Oswald intervened so rudely before Lear's letter had been seen, they read Goneril's.

"On which contents they *summoned up their many*, straight *took horse!*—commanded me to *follow* and attend the leisure of their answer," Kent reports—adding, "gave me *cold looks!*"

"And meeting here the other messenger, whose welcome, I perceived, had poisoned *mine*—and being the very fellow that of late *displayed so saucily* against *Your Highness*—having more *man* than wit about me, *drew!*"

"He raised the house with loud and coward cries! Your son-in-law and daughter found that trespass worth the shame which here it suffers."

As Lear digests it, the fool shakes his head at the portent: "Winter's not gone yet, if the wild geese fly *that way!*" He sings:

"*Fathers that bear bags*"—money bags—

"*Shall see their children kind!*"

*But fathers that wear rags*

*Do make their children blind;*

*Fortune, that arrant whore,*

*Ne'er turns a key for the poor!*

"But, for all this," he says, cheerfully, "thou shalt have as many *dolours*"—a play on *dollars*—"from thy daughters as thou canst count in a *year!*"

"Oh, how this worry swells up, toward my *heart!*" groans Lear. He winces and swallows, pressing both hands at his doublet. "*Hysterica passio*, down!—thou climbing sorrow, thine element's *below!*" He looks sourly at Kent. "Where is *this* daughter?"

"With the earl, sir, here within."

"Follow me not; stay here," Lear tells his messenger dryly. He strides angrily into the castle.

The tall gentleman asks the prisoner, "Made you no more offence but what you speak of?"

Kent shrugs. "None," he would argue—despite having assaulted Oswald, crossed swords with the earl's son, and insulted the duke and duchess. He nods toward the king's halved company. "How chance the king comes with so small a train?"

The jester's laugh is tart. "And thou hadst been set i' the stocks for *that* question, thou hadst well deserved it!"

"Why, Fool?"

To the fool, the reason for the retinue's losses, which worsen daily, seems manifest. "We'll set thee to *school* with an *ant*," he says, cap-bells tinkling, "to teach thee there's no labouring i' the *winter*." He elucidates—in his fashion—on loyalty under adversity: "All who follow their noses are led by their *eyes*—except *blind* men. And there's not a nose among twenty but can smell him that's *stinking*!"

"The great one that goes up the hill, let *him* draw thee after. But *let go thy hold* when a great wheel runs *down* a hill, lest it *break thy neck* with following it!"

The fool looks kindly at Kent, who also will follow Lear regardless of his fortune. "When a *wise* man gives thee better counsel... give me *mine* again," he says gently. "I would have none but knaves follow it, since a fool gives it."

His song is plaintive:

*"That sir who serves and seeks for gain,  
And follows but for form,  
Will pack when it begins to rain,  
And leave thee in the storm.  
But I will tarry—the fool will stay,  
And let the wise man fly.  
The knave turns fool who runs away;  
The fool's no knave, perdy!"*

Kent, who never runs away, nods. "Where learned you this, Fool?"

The jester laughs at him. "Not i' the *stocks*, fool!"

Lear glares, incredulous. "*Deny* to speak with *me*?" His affected whine is mocking: "They are *sick*? They are *weary*? They have travelled all the night? Mere *fetches*!—the images of *revolt* and *flying off*!" he tells his host angrily. "Fetch me a *better answer*!"

Lear returns to the courtyard, followed by an apologetic Gloucester. The former king is now astonished to find himself being shunned.

"My dear lord," says the earl, "you know the fiery quality of the duke!—how unremoveable and fixed he is in his own course!"

"*Vengeance! Plague! Death! Chaos!*" cries Lear angrily. A king put off for a duke's petulance? "*Fiery? What a quality!*"

"Why, Gloucester, Gloucester," he says, striving to regain composure, "I'd *speak* with the Duke of Cornwall and his wife!"

"Well, my good lord," says the nobleman, weakly, "I have informed them so..."

"*Informed* them!" He looks at Gloucester in red-faced wonder. "Dost thou *understand* me, man?"

"Aye, my good lord," says the earl, highly discomfited.

"The *king*," Lear says slowly, his voice rising, "would *speak* with *Cornwall*!—the dear *father* would with his *daughter* speak!—*commands* her service! Are they *informed of this*?"

"*My breath and blood!* Fiery! The fiery *duke*! Tell the hot duke that—"

He pauses, refraining only with the greatest effort. "No, but not yet..."

"Maybe he is not *well*," Lear tries to allow reasonably. "*Infirmity* doth still neglect all offices whereto *good* health is bound; we are not ourselves when our nature, being oppressèd, commands the *mind* to suffer with the body. I'll forbear, and am fall'n out of my more *headier* will to take this indisposèd and sickly fit for a *sound* man's."

But again he sees Kent, confined in stocks. "*Death* on my *state*!—wherefore should he *sit here*?" he cries. "This act persuades me that this remotion of the duke and her is *only scheming*!"

“Give me my servant forth!” he demands, wrath and voice both climbing. “Go tell *the duke and ’s wife* I’d speak with them, *now!—immediately!* Bid them come forth and hear me, or at their *chamber-door* I’ll beat a *drum* till it *cry sleep* to death!”

“I would have all *well* betwixt you!” says poor old Gloucester. He bows humbly, and heads back into the castle.

Lear’s head is throbbing. He clutches at his chest. “*Oh, me, my heart!* But, *down*, my rising heart!”

The fool offers comic counsel: “*Cry* to it, Nuncle!—as the cockney did to the *eels* when she put ’em i’ the pastry alive: she knapped ’em o’ the coxcombs with a stick, and cried, ‘*Down, wantons, down!*’

“’Twas *her* brother,” he adds, “who, in pure kindness to his horse, *battered its hay!*”—another futile, harmful action.

Oaken double doors are opened onto the stone terrace, and the Duke and Duchess of Cornwall emerge, followed by Gloucester and several of the nobles’ attendants.

“Good morrow to you both!” says Lear.

At a nod from Gloucester, one of his servants frees Kent from the stocks. Regan frowns.

“Hail to Your Grace,” says Cornwall.

“I am glad to see Your Highness,” she tells her father.

“Regan, I think you *are!*—I know what *reason* I have to think so! If thou shouldst *not* be glad, I would divorce me from thy mother’s tomb as sepulchring an *adultrous!*”

He seems to notice Kent. “Oh, are you *free?*” he asks pointedly, tempted to raise the complaint; but he turns back. “Some other time for that.

“Belovèd Regan, thy sister’s *naught!* Oh, Regan, she hath tied sharp-toothed *unkindness*, like a *vulture, here!*”—he claps a fist to his heart. “I can scarce *speak* to thee!—thou’lt not believe with how *depraved* a quality—” His voice wavers. “Oh, Regan!” he sobs.

“I pray you, sir, take patience,” says she, calmly. “I suspect *you* less know how to value her *deserving* than *she* to scant her *duty.*”

He blinks. “Say: how is that?”

“I cannot think my sister in the *least* would fail her obligation! If, sir, perchance she have restrained the riots of your followers, ’tis on such ground, and to such wholesome end, as clears her from all blame.”

“*My curses on her!*”

“Oh, sir, you are *old,*” says Regan. “Nature in you stands on the very verge of her confine; you should be ruled and led by some discretion that discerns your state better than you yourself. Therefore, I pray you that to our sister you do make *return*. Say you have wronged her, sir.”

“Ask her *forgiveness?*” Lear stares. “Do you but *mark* how *this* becomes the house,” he tells her, lowering his kingly frame to kneel. He affects a pathetic whimper: “*Dear* daughter, I *confess* that I am old; age is *unnecessary!* On my *knees* I *beg* that you’ll vouchsafe me raiment, bed, and *food!*”

“Good sir, no more,” says Regan, annoyed. “These are unsightly tricks. Return you to my sister.”

Lear rises. “*Never*, Regan! She hath abated me of *half my train!*—*looked bleak* upon me!—*struck* me, with her tongue most *serpent-like*, unto the very *heart!*” His anger returns: “May all the *storèd vengeance* of heaven fall on her *ingrateful top!*”

“*Strike her young bones*, you taking airs, with *lameness!*”

“Fie, sir, *fie!*” cries Cornwall, at the unseemly invocation.

But Lear persists: “You nimble *lightnings*, dart your blinding flames *into her scornful eyes!* *Infect her beauty*, you fen-sucked fogs, drawn by the powerful sun, to *fall and blast her pride!*”

Regan is disgusted. “Oh, the blest gods! *So* will you wish on *me*, when the rash mood is on!”

“No, Regan!—*thou* shalt never have my curse,” Lear assures her. “Thy tender-hearted nature shall not give *thee* o’er to harshness. *Her eyes* are *fierce*, but thine do *comfort*, and not burn.

“’Tis not in *thee* to begrudge my *pleasures*, to *cut off my train!*—to bandy hasty words, to scant my *sizes!*—and in conclusion to oppose the bolt against my *coming in!* Thou better know’st the offices of *nature*, bond of *childhood*, effects of *courtesy*, dues of *gratitude*.

“Thy *half o’ the kingdom* hast thou not forgot, wherein *I* thee endowed!”

Says the stern lady, “Good sir, speak to a *purpose*.”

Lear realizes that flattery has fallen flat. “*Who put my man i’ the stocks?*”

**B**ut just then, horns herald the arrival of other noble visitors to Gloucester Castle.

“What trumpet’s that?” asks Cornwall.

“I know’t: my sister’s,” says Regan. “This approves her letter that she would soon be here.”

Oswald moves forward and bows deeply—to Cornwall and Regan.

“Is your lady come?” she asks.

Lear interjects angrily, “*This* is a slave whose easy, borrowed *pride* dwells in the fickle grace of her he follows! *Out*, varlet, from my *sight!*” he commands.

Cornwall—who now wears a gold crown—frowns, affronted by the impertinence. “What *means* Your Grace!”—no longer *Your Majesty*.

But Lear will not be contained. “*Who stocked my servant?* Regan, I have good hope *thou* didst not *know* of’t!” He sees a group of nobles and attendants approaching. “Who comes here?”

Goneril has arrived with her train; she comes directly to her sister.

Lear looks up to the gathering rain clouds. *O heavens, if you do love old men, if your sweet sway affirm obedience, if yourselves are old, make it your cause!—send down, and take my part!* He scowls at Goneril. “Art not *ashamed* to look upon this beard?”

But the ladies are greeting each other warmly, he sees, to his dismay. “Oh, Regan!—wilt thou *take her by the hand?*”

“Why *not* by the hand, sir?” demands Goneril. “How have I offended? All’s not *offence* that finds *indiscretion*—and dotage *terms* so!”

“O sides, you are too tough!—will you yet hold?” groans Lear, suppressing growing rage. “*How came my man i’ the stocks?*”

“I set him there, sir; but his own disorders deserved much less *advancement*,” says Cornwall, sourly.

“You! *Did* you?” Clearly, Lear expects a defense.

But Regan is impatient. “I pray you, Father, being weak, *seem* so.

“If till the expiration of your month you will return and sojourn with my sister, dismissing half your train, come *then* to me. I am now away from home, and out of that provision which shall be needful for your accommodations.”

Lear stands aghast. “Return to *her!*—*after fifty men dismissed?* No!—rather I’d abjure *all* roofs, and in necessity’s sharp pinch choose to wag against the enmity o’ the *air!*—to be a comrade with the *wolf* and *owl!*”

“Return with *her?* Why—the hot-blooded *France*, who *dowerless* took our youngest born—I could as well be brought to kneel at *his* throne, and, *squire*-like, beg *pension* to keep base life afoot!

“Return with *her?* Persuade me rather to be slave and sumpter to *this detested groom!*” he cries, pointing at Oswald.

“At your choice, sir,” says Goneril coldly.

“I *prithe*e, daughter,” pleads Lear, his mind reeling, “do not make me *mad!*”

But, seeing her steely stare, he regards her with bitter resignation. “I will not trouble thee, my child. Farewell, We’ll no more meet, no more see one another.

“But yet thou art my *flesh*, my *blood*, my daughter,” he says, anger returning, “or, rather, a *disease* that’s in the flesh which I must needs *call* mine!—thou art a *boil*, a *plague-sore*, an embossed *carbuncle* of my *corrupted* blood!”

Again he pulls back: “But I’ll not *chide* thee; let *shame* come when it will; *I* do not call it,” he says, trying to calm himself. “*I* do not bid the *thunder-bearer shoot*, nor tell tales of thee to high-judging *Jove!*”

“Mend when thou canst,” he says, condescendingly. “Be better at thy *leisure*. I can be patient; I can stay with Regan, I and my fifty knights.”

“Not altogether so,” counters Regan immediately. “I looked not for you yet, nor am I provided for your fit welcome. Give ear, sir, to my sister—for those who mingle *reason* with your passions must be content to think you *old*, and so—” She shakes her head, unwilling to argue further. “But she *knows what she does*,” says Regan, affirming Goneril’s position.

Lear is pale. “Is this *well spoken?*”

“I dare avouch it, sir,” says Regan. “What?—*fifty followers!*—is it not well? What should you need of *more?*—yea, or so *many*, sith both cost and danger speak ’gainst so great a number! How, in one house, should so many people under two commands hold amity? ’Tis hard—almost impossible!”

Goneril concurs. “Why might not you, my lord, receive attendance from those that *she* calls servants, or from *mine?*”

“Why not, my lord?” asks Regan. “If then they chanced to slack you, we could control them. If you will come to *me*—for now I spy a *danger*—I entreat you to bring but *five and twenty*: to no more will I give place or notice.”

Lear is staggered. “I gave you *all*—”

“And in your *good time* you gave it,” mutters Regan.

“—made you my guardians, my depositaries—but *kept* a reservation to be followed with such a number! What?—must I come to you with *five and twenty*, Regan? Said you *so?*”

“And speak’t *again*, my lord; no more with me.”

He sees the sisters in a new light. “These wicked creatures do look *well* favoured only when others are *more* wicked! Not being the *worst* stands in some rank of *praise*.”

He turns to Goneril. “I’ll go with thee: thy fifty yet doth double five and twenty, and thou art twice *her* love.”

But that lady has further thoughts. “Hear me, my lord: what need you five and twenty!—ten, or *five*, to follow in a house where twice so many have a command to tend you?”

“What need *one?*” asks Regan.

“*Oh*, reason not the *need!*” cries Lear. “Our basest *beggars* are in the poorest objects superfluous! Allow his nature no more than Nature *needs*, Man’s life’s as cheap as *beast’s!*”

“Thou art a lady; if only to go *warm* were the purpose, thy nature needs not what *gorgeous* thou wear’st!—which *scarcely keeps thee warm!*”

“But, as for *true* need—” He pauses, for a moment, choking, unable to speak. “You heavens, give me that *patience!*—*patience I* need!”

*You see me here, you gods, a poor old man, as full of grief as age—wretched in both! If it be you that stir these daughters’ hearts against their father, fool me not so much as to bear it tamely! Touch me with noble anger, and let not women’s weapons, water-drops, stain my man’s cheeks!*

“*No*, you unnatural *hags*,” he growls, his voice cracking as he abandons the hope of support from either. “I will have such *revenges* on you both that all the *world* shall—

“I will do *such things!*—

“What they are, yet I know not— But they shall be the *terrors* of the *earth!*”

“You think I’ll *weep*,” he croaks, swaying. “No, I’ll *not* weep! I have full *cause* of weeping; but this heart shall break into a hundred thousand flaws or ere I’ll weep!”

He turns abruptly, staggering away, and clutches the clown’s woolen sleeve for support. “Oh, Fool, I shall go *mad!*”

Kent casts a glare of utter loathing at the king's daughters, then grasps Lear's arm to help him away toward their horses. Gloucester follows them, still hoping to effect some form of reconciliation.

## Chapter Seven The Heath

**D**rops of rain, borne on a sudden gust of chill wind, splash down. Miles away, in the still-darkening sky, flashes of lightning pierce ominous clouds.

"Let us withdraw," says Cornwall. "'Twill be a storm."

"This house is little; the old man and his people cannot be well bestowed," says Regan.

"'Tis his own blame," Goneril says coldly. "Hath put *himself* from rest, and must needs taste his folly."

"As for his particulars, I'll receive *him* gladly—but not one *follower!*"

"So am I purposed. Where is my lord of Gloucester?"

Cornwall gestures toward the approaching earl. "Followed the old man forth. He is returned...."

"The king is in high rage!" Gloucester tells them.

"Whither is he going?" asks the duke.

"He calls, '*To horse!*' but will go I know not whither." The earl is clearly worried about the nobleman.

Cornwall is not. "'Tis best to give him way; he leads himself."

"My lord, by no means entreat him to *stay*," Goneril tells Gloucester.

The earl fears these nobles, but he knows well how unforgiving this flat land's harsh weather can be. "*Alack*, the night comes on, and the bleak winds do sorely ruffle! For many miles about there's scarce a bush!"

Regan gathers the extravagant skirts of her elegant raiment. "Oh, sir, to *wilful* men, the injuries that they *themselves* procure must be the schoolmasters.

"Shut up your doors. He is attended with a *desperate train*," she warns, "and what they may *incense* him to, being apt to have his ear abused, wisdom bids *fear!*" She heads indoors.

Cornwall can see that Gloucester is averse. "Shut up your doors, my lord," he orders. "'Tis a wild night. My Regan counsels well; come, out o' the storm."

As the heavy doors are all pulled shut, then barred, the looming clouds grow darker. Inside, the lords and ladies gather before the castle's warm main hearth.

A cold, heavy rain begins to drive against the high walls of stone.

**O**n the open heath, night has fallen. Standing beside his horse, Kent peers through the gloom of slanting rain. "Who's there, besides foul weather?"

"One minded like the weather: most *unquietly!*" replies the gentleman he last saw while confined in the stocks.

"I know you," says Kent. "Where's the king?"

"Contesting with the fretful elements!—bids the winds blow the earth into the sea, or swell the curlèd water 'bove the main, so that things might *change* or *cease!*—tears his white hair, which the impetuous blasts, with eyeless rage, catch in their fury, and make nothing of!—strives in his little world of man to *out-scorn* the to-and-fro conflicting of *wind and rain!*"

"This night, wherein the cub-drawn *bear*"—hungry after nursing—"would couch, the *lion* and the belly-pinched *wolf* keep their fur dry, *he* runs unbonneted, and bids what will to *take all!*"

"But who is *with* him?"

"None but the fool—who labours to out-jest his heart-struck injuries."

Kent moves closer. “Sir, I *do* know you,” he says gravely, “and dare, upon the warrant of my knowing, commend a critical thing to you!

“Although as yet the face of it be covered with mutual cunning, there is *division* ’twixt Albany and Cornwall, who have—as who, their great stars thronèd and set high, have not?—*servants* who *seem* no less, but who are for *France* the *spies* of intelligent speculations about our state!—either in what hath been *seen*—snubs and packings of the dukes ere the hard reign which both of them have borne against the old, kind king—or something *deeper*, whereof perchance those are but furnishings.”

The Earl of Kent speaks intently: “But, *true it is* that from France there *comes a power*”—armed forces—“into this scattered kingdom!—who, already wise in our negligence, have *secret* feet in some of our best ports!—and are near to showing their *open banner*!”

“Now as to you: if on my credit you dare build so far as to *make your speed to Dover*, you shall find some who will *thank* you for making just report on how unnatural and bemaddening *sorrow* the *king* hath cause to complain of!”

The port of Dover is on Britain’s southeastern shore, in the shire of Kent, just across the strait from Gaul.

“I am a gentleman of blood and breeding,” says the earl, “and, from some knowledge and assurance, offer this office to you.”

The courtier nods. “I will talk further with you.”

“No, do not!” says Kent urgently. “For confirmation that I am much more than my outer wall, open this pouch, and take what it contains! If you shall see *Cordelia*—and fear not but you shall—*show her this ring*, and she will tell you who your fellow is, that yet you do not know.”

The gentleman accepts the ring, and puts a letter from the bag into his coat pocket.

Kent looks up as the weather worsens. “*Fie* on this *storm*! I will go seek the king.”

“Give me your hand,” says the gentleman, and shakes Kent’s warmly. “Have you more to say?” he asks, gathering his horse’s reins.

“*Few* words, but, in effect, more than all yet.” Looking out into the dark wilderness, Kent says, wryly, “That when we have *found* the king—in which your pain is *that* way, I’ll go this—he that first lights on him *holla* the other!”

The gentleman nods. Both know their king is lost—and each must try to help him.

They ride away, the horses’ hooves splashing up mud in the pounding rain.

**B**low, winds, and crack your cheeks!” roars Lear into the blackness of the wide, barren heath. “*Rage! Blow*, you cataracts and hurricanoes—*spout* till you have *drenched* our steeples, *drowned the weather-cocks*!”

“You sulphurous and *thought-executing fires*, vaunt couriers to *oak-cleaving bolts*, *singe my white head*!”

“And *thou*, all-shaking *thunder*, *smite flat* the thick *rotundity o’ the world*! *Crack*, Nature’s *moulds*!—spill at once all germens that make *ingrateful Man*!”

The fool’s woolen motley is soaked through. “Oh, Nuncle, courting *holy-water* in a dry house is better than this *rain-water* out o’ door! Good Nuncle, *in*, and ask thy daughters’ blessing! Here’s a night pities neither wise man nor fool!”

But Lear extends his arms toward the clouds. “*Rumble thy bellyful! Spit fire! Spout rain!*” he bellows. “Nor rain, wind, thunder, fire are *my daughters*! I tax not *you*, you elements, with *unkindness*! I never gave *you* kingdom, called you *children*!—*you* owe me no affirmation! Then *let fall* at your horrible pleasure!

“Here I stand, your *slave*, a poor, infirm, weak, and *despisèd old man*.”

“But yet I call *you servile ministers*,” he growls, “who have with two pernicious daughters *joinèd* your high-engendered battles ’gainst a head so old and white as this!

“*Oh, oh, ’tis foul!*”

As the rain continues to beat against them, Lear crouches beside the fool on an exposed ledge of eroded rock, fists pressed against his bare temples.

The jester regards him. "He that has a *house* to put's head in has a *good* head-piece!" He sings a song—a ribald one, warning of infection:

"The codpiece—that will house  
Before the head has any.  
"The head and it shall louse—  
Thus beggars marry many!  
The man that makes his toe  
What he his heart should make,"—leader,  
"Shall of a corn cry woe,  
And turn his sleep to wake!"

As Lear moans, the fool, an old bachelor, mutters glumly. "For there was never yet fair woman but she made mouths in a glass"—practiced false expressions with a mirror.

Lear sees that the boisterous sky ignores his imperious commands; he tries to suppress frustration: "Now I will be the *pattern* of all *patience*; I will say *nothing!*"

Kent, riding slowly through the dark, and listening, has found them. "Who's there?" he calls, dismounting and coming over.

The fool greets him. "Marry, here's *grace* and a *cod-piece!*—that's a wise man and a fool."

Kent is alarmed by the sight of Lear's sopping-wet gray beard. "Alas, sir, sit you *here?*"

"Things that *love* night love not such nights as *these!*—the wrathful skies gall the very *wanderers* of the dark, and make them keep to their *caves!* Since I was man, such *sheets* of fire, such *bursts* of horrid thunder, such groans of *roaring* wind and rain I remember never to have heard! Man's nature cannot carry the *affliction*, nor the *fear!*"

Lear, seething again, rises slowly to commandeer chaos. "Let the great *gods*, that keep this dreadful pother o'er our heads, *find out their enemies* now!

"*Tremble*, thou wretch, that hast within thee undivulged crimes, unwhipped by *justice!*" he cries. "*Hide* thee, thou *bloody*-handed, thou *perjured*, and thou man of *simular* virtue who art *incestuous!* *Caitiff*, that under covert and convenient *seeming* hast practised against a man's life, *to pieces shake!*"

"Closely pent-up *guilts*, *rive your concealing containers*, and cry these dreadful summoners' *grace!*"—beg the gods' forgiveness.

The words—loud to him, lost in the storm—echo accusingly in his head. "I am a man more sinned *against* than sinning!" he protests. Again he turns pensive.

"Alack, bare-headed!" says Kent. "Gracious my lord, hard by here is a hovel; some friendship will it lend you 'gainst the tempest! Repose you there, while I to that hard *house*—more *harder* than the stones whereof 'tis raised!—which even but now denied me, demanding after you, to come in—return, and *force* their scanted courtesy!"

Lear regards Kent's face searchingly, trying to recognize him. He shakes his head. "My wits begin to turn." He leans down, takes the shivering fool's arm, and helps him to his feet. "Come on, my boy. How dost, my boy?" He feels the slender man's shaking. "Art *cold?* I am cold myself.

"Where is this straw, my fellow?" he asks Kent. "The *art* of our necessities is strange, that can make vile things *precious*. Come, your hovel."

Lear is calm, now—quiet and contemplative. "Poor fool, and knave, I have yet *one* part in my heart that's sorry for *thee*," he tells the others.

The fool sings:

"He that has but a little tiny wit—  
With hey, ho, the wind and the rain—  
Must make content with his fortune's fit,  
For the rain it raineth every day."



Lear nods. "True, my good boy." He turns to Kent. "Come, bring us to this hovel."  
The banished earl guides Lear gently down the dark slope.  
"This is a bold enough night to *cool a courtesan!*" mutters the fool, as flashes of lightning illuminate the roiling storm-clouds towering above. "I'll speak a prophecy ere I go."

Lear has hurled indictments to the gods. The fool addresses the globe:

"When *priests* are more in Word than *matter*;  
When *brewers* mar their malt with water;  
When nobles are their *tailors'* tutors;  
No *heretics* burn but wenches' suitors;  
When every case in law is *right*;  
No squire in *debt*, nor no poor knight;  
When *slanders* do not live in tongues,  
And *cutpurses* come not to throngs;  
When usurers count their gold i' the *field*,  
And bawds and whores do *churches* build—  
*Then* shall the realm of Albion"—Britain—  
Come to great confusion!"

In short, *never*.

"Then comes the time, who lives to see't,  
That going shall not be used with *feet!*" Doomsday.

He shuffles away, on foot, following Lear.

His illegitimate son is writing by candlelight at a desk in his own chambers when Gloucester surprises him with a late visit. The earl's conversation with Lord Cornwall and Lady Regan has left him very distraught.

"Alack, *alack*, Edmund, I like not this unnatural dealing! When I desired their leave that I might *pity* him, they *took* from me *the use of mine own house!*—charged me, on pain of their perpetual displeasure, neither to speak of him, entreat for him, nor any way *sustain* him!"

"Most savage and unnatural!"

Gloucester whispers fearfully: "*Go to*; say you *nothing!*" he cautions. "There's a *division* betwixt the dukes—and a *worse* matter than *that!* I have received a letter this night—

"'Tis dangerous to be *spoken of!*—I have locked the letter in my closet!" He listens for footsteps. "These injuries the king now bears will be *revengèd home!*—there's *part* of a power *already footed!*

"We must incline to the king! I will seek him, and *privily* relieve him! Go you and maintain talk with the duke, so that my charity be not by him perceivèd. If he ask for me, I am ill, and gone to bed.

"Though I *die* for it—and no less is threatened me!—the king, my old master, must be *relieved!*

"There is some strange thing toward, Edmund; pray you, be careful!" He pats his son's shoulder, and slips quietly into the corridor.

Edmund smiles. *The courtesy forbidden thee shall the duke instantly know of!—and of that letter, too!*

*This seems a fair deserving!—and must draw to me that which my father loses: no less than all!*

*The younger rises when the old doth fall!*

He blows out the candle.

The few small, withered trees that eke out existence on the mossy heath creak and snap, as harsh cold winds push past the sedge, streaming over fen and bog to whip the reeds and bend down rushes.

Kent has led Lear and his fool to an old shed, dilapidated by years of rough weather. Rain pounds on the roof's rough-hewn gray boards, intended only to shelter cattle's hay from snow, and drips down inside, while the violent storm yowls unabated.

"Here is the place, my lord," says Kent. "Good my lord, enter!—the tyranny of the open night's too rough for nature to endure!"

The nobleman, his white hair matted with rain, surveys the skies calmly. "Let me alone."

"Good my lord, enter here!"

"Wilt break my heart?"

"I had rather break mine own," says Kent softly. "Good my lord, *enter!*"

"Thou think'st 'tis *much* that this contentious storm invades us to the skin," says Lear. "So 'tis, to *thee*; but where a greater malady is fixèd, the lesser is scarce felt. Thou'ldst shun a bear; but if thy flight lay toward the *raging sea*, thou'ldst meet the bear i' the mouth! When the mind's *free*, the body's *delicate*; the tempest in *my* mind doth from my senses take all feeling else save what *beats there!*"

"*Filial ingratitude!* Is it not as if this *mouth* should *tear* this hand for lifting food to't?" He looks down, jaws tightening. "But I will *punish home!*" Brusquely, he waves away unseen torment. "No, I will weep no more!" He peers, unseeing, into the wind. "In such a night to shut me out!

"*Pour on!*" he cries out. "I will *endure!*"

"In such a night as *this!* Oh, *Regan, Goneril!* Your old kind father, whose frank heart *gave all—*

"Oh, that way *madness* lies!—let me shun *that*," he groans. "No more of that!" He turns and steadies himself on a broken post by the lean-to, as rain spatters off his wet cloak.

Gently, Kent takes his arm. "Good my lord, enter here."

"Prithee, go in thyself; seek thine own ease," Lear tells him, holding back. "This tempest will not give me leave to ponder on things would hurt me *more*." With a loud *crack!* lightning strikes near them, lighting the sky momentarily, and he glimpses his sodden companions; then, in the ensuing thunder, he seems almost to awaken. He nods. "But I'll go in.

"In, boy," says Lear to the fool, "go first, you houseless poverty." The clown bows, and with a courtly gesture toward the dark opening, waits to follow Lear. "Nay, get thee in! I'll pray, and then I'll sleep," he assures the fool, who crouches and enters the low structure.

The old man stands quietly in the gusting wind. "Poor naked wretches, whereso'er you are, that bide the pelting of this pitiless storm, how shall your unhousèd heads and unfed sides, your frayed and windowed raggedness, defend you from seasons such as these?

"Oh, I have ta'en too little care about this!

"Take *physic*, pomp!—expose thyself to feel what wretches feel, that thou mayst shake the superflux to them, and show the heavens as more *just!*"

A voice calls out from the shelter: "*Fathom and half! Fathom and half, Poor Tom!*"

The startled fool warns, frantically, "*Come not in here, Nuncle! Here's a spirit! Help me, help me!*" He scrambles out.

Kent soothes the weary and frightened jester. "Give me thy hand." He calls, over the wind, "Who's there?"

"*A spirit, a spirit!*" insists the fool. "He says his name's Poor Tom!"

Kent steps to the opening. "What art thou that dost grumble there i' the straw? Come forth!"

The disheveled, half-naked man who emerges, shivering and clutching a torn blanket around his shoulders, looks to be quite mad. "*Away!—the foul fiend follows me!*" he cries. "Through the sharp hawthorn blows the cold wind!"

He looks at the others, all of them soaked, but dressed well enough. "*Humph!* Go cold to thy *bed* and *warm* thee!"

Lear—tired and feverish—stares, fascinated by the image of destitute desperation. "Hast thou given all to thy two daughters? And art thou come to this?" A lunatic must amble the countryside,

homeless, subsisting on whatever he receives from begging—sometimes kind charity, often callous cruelty.

“Who gives anything to poor *Tom*?—whom the *foul fiend* hath led through *fire* and through *flame*, o’er ford and through *whirlpool*, *bog* and *quagmire*!—hath laid *knives* under his pillow and *halters* in his pew, set *ratsbane* by his porridge!”—all urging suicide, “made *him*, proud of *heart*, to curse his own shadow as a *traitor*!—and to ride on a bay trotting-horse over four ancient bridges!”

He has fled by the compass-points within “the four opposing coigns, which the world together joins,” pursued by a devil that tempts him to self-destruction, and goads his constant fear of betrayal.

“Bless *thy* five wits! *Tom*’s a-cold!—*Oh, do dee, do dee, do dee*. Bless *thee* from whirlwinds, star-blasting—and being caught! Do poor *Tom*, whom the foul fiend vexes, some *charity*!” He stops, suddenly crouching as he spots his demon. He points, jabbing quickly, eyes darting from place to place: “There could I *have* him now!—and *there*—and there again!—and *there*!”

A flash of lightning shatters the brief, eerie silence: rumbling thunder rolls away through the night over field and marsh. Then the winds wail again, unrelenting.

Lear is drawn to *Tom*, wondering how his counterpart has come to be demented. “What, have his *daughters* brought him to this pass?”

“Couldst thou save *nothing*?” he asks. “Didst thou give them *all*?”

“Nay,” says the fool, pointing, “he reserved a *blanket*, else *we* had *all* been shamed!”

Lear loudly demands retribution for the beggar: “Now, all the *plagues* that in the pendulous air hang fated o’er men’s faults *light on thy daughters*!”

“He hath no daughters, sir,” says Kent quietly.

“*Death*, traitor!” cries Lear. “Nothing could have subdued his nature to such a lowness but *unkind daughters*! It is the *fashion*,” he cries, his voice cracking, “that discarded fathers should have thus-little mercy from their flesh!”

His thoughts again turn inward: “*Judicious* punishment!—’twas *this* flesh *begot* those pelican daughters!” The bird’s young are believed to peck blood from the mother, even as she feeds them.

Huddled within his old, worn blanket, the beggar chants bits of rude song and hunters’ calls: “*Pillicock* sat on *Pillicock-hill*. *Halloo, halloo, loo, loo!*”

The fool shakes his head. “This cold night will turn us *all* to fools and madmen!”

In a sing-song voice, the vagabond rehearses his wisdom: “Take *heed* o’ the foul fiend!—obey thy *parents*; keep thy word *justly*; *swear* not; commit not with a man’s sworn *spouse*; set not thy sweetheart on *proud array*...” He shivers, pulling the dripping blanket closer. “*Tom*’s a-cold.”

Lear stares at the bedrabbled, crouching figure. “What hast thou been?”

The beggar thinks; remembrance seems painful. “A serving-man, proud in heart and mind, that *curled my hair*,”—sought to attract women, “wore *gloves in my cap*!”—a successful suitor’s emblem. “Served the lust of my mistress’ *heart*—and did the *act of darkness* with her! Swore as many *oaths* as I spake words—and *broke* them in the sweet face of heaven! One who slept in the *contriving* of lust, and waked to *do* it!

“*Wine* loved I—*deeply*, dice, *dearly*”—at high cost, “and in *women* out-paramoured *the Turk*! *False* of heart, *light* of ear, *bloody* of hand; *hog* in sloth, *fox* in stealth, *wolf* in greediness!

“*Lion* in prey... *dog* in *madness*.” His eyes narrow as he warns, ominously, “Let not the *rustling* of silks nor the *creaking* of shoes”—sounds accompanying sex—“*betray* thy poor heart to *woman*! Keep thy foot out of *brothels*, thy hand out of *plackets*”—slits, “thy *pen* from *lenders*’ books!”—penis from whores. He concludes, more calmly, “And defy the foul fiend.”

Shivering jars his agued frame. “Still through the hawthorn blows a cold wind...”

Kent wonders if the man has heard of French invaders in the east; he wants to alarm Lear no further. *Stay you mum! Hear of no dolphin, my boy!—cessez! Nonny, my boy, let him*—the dolphin, an emblem of France—*trot by!*

Lear is shaking in the cold, but unaware of it. “Why, thou wert better *in thy grave* than to answer with thy *uncovered* body this extremity of the skies!

“Is *man* no more than *this*? Consider him well.” He, too, crouches, now, and praises the pauper. “Thou owest the *worm* no silk, the *beast* no hide, the *sheep* no wool, the *civet cat* no perfume! *Hah!* Here’s three of *us* who are *sophisticated!*—thou art the thing *itself!* *Unaccommodated*, man is no more than such a poor, bare, forkèd *animal* as *thou* art!”

He rises, entranced by such simplicity. “Off, off, you *lendings!* Come, *unbutton* here,” he cries, tearing loose his cloak, unfastening his doublet.

“Prithee, Nuncle, be *contented*,” moans the fool. “’Tis a naughty night to *swim* in!

“Now a little *fire* in a wild *field* were like an old lecher’s heart: a small *spark*; all the rest of’s body cold!”

He points southward. “Look, here comes a *walking* fire!”

## Chapter Eight Rescue, Betrayal

The Earl of Gloucester, carrying a torch, has found the outcasts despite the storm. The madman backs away from the approaching flame’s light. “This is the foul fiend *Flibbertigibbet!* He begins at curfew and walks till the first cock! He gives the *web* and the *pinch*, *squints* the eye, and makes the *hare-lip!*—*mildews* the white wheat, and *hurts* the poor *creatures of earth!*

“Saint *Withhold* footed once in the cold.

He met the mare and her nine-fold!”—nightmare’s offspring, the hours of darkness.

“Bid her alight, and her troth plight—

Cried, ‘*Aroint* thee, *witch!*—*aroint* thee, *night!*’—begone.

Kent comes to Lear. “How fares Your Grace?”

The white-haired lord’s fever is rising; fearful now, he edges behind Kent to eye Gloucester warily. “What’s he?”

“Who’s there?” Kent asks Gloucester, maintaining his disguise. “What is’t you seek?”

“What are *you*, there?” demands Gloucester; they are on his land. “Your *names?*”

The young man is looking down and away, keeping his face in shadow. “Poor *Tom*, that eats the swimming frog, the toad, the tadpole, the wall-newt in the water! That in the fury of his heart, when the foul fiend rages, eats cow-dung for salads; swallows the old rat and the ditch-dog; drinks the green mantle off the standing pool!—who is whipped from tithing to tithing, and stock-punished, and imprisoned!

“Who hath *had* three suits to his back, six shirts to his body, horse to ride, and weapon to wear,” he remembers, sadly. “But mice and rats, and such small deer, have been *Tom*’s food for seven long year.

“Beware my *follower*,” he whispers, wide-eyed; he starts, looking behind him. “*Peace*, *Smulkin*—*peace*, thou *fiend!*”

Gloucester, watching them in the flickering light of the wind-whipped torch, is mortified.

“*What?*—hath Your Grace *no better company?*”

“The Prince of Darkness is a *gentleman*,” notes the madman indignantly. “*Modo* he’s called, and *Mahu*....”

Gloucester tells Lear, “Our flesh-and-blood is grown so vile, my lord, that it doth hate what begets it!”

“Poor *Tom*’s a-cold!”

Gloucester offers Lear his hand. “*Go in with me!*—my duty cannot suffer to obey in *all* your daughters’ hard commands! Though their injunction be to bar my doors, and let this tyrannous

night take hold upon you, yet have I ventured to come seek you out, and bring you where both fire and food are ready!”

Lear has been growing more abstracted. “First let me talk with this philosopher.” He turns to the lunatic. “What is the cause of *thunder*?”

“Good my lord, *take* his offer!” pleads Kent. “Go into the *house*!”

But Lear craves wisdom. “I’ll talk a word with this same learned Theban! What is your study?” he asks Tom.

“*How to prevent the fiend!*” He scratches himself. “And to kill vermin.”

“Let me ask you one word in private.” They move away to confer behind a curtain of raindrops that, in the wavering torchlight, glisten fleetingly against blackness.

Kent regards the pair: highest and lowest of the realm. “Importune him once more to go, my lord; his wits begin to unsettle.”

“Canst thou blame him?” asks Gloucester. “His daughters seek his *death!*”

“Ah, that good *Kent!*—he *said* it would be thus, poor banished man!

“Thou say’st the king grows *mad*; I’ll tell thee, friend, I am almost mad *myself!* I had a son now outlawed from my blood; he *sought my life!*—but lately, very *lately!*”

“I *loved* him, friend!—no father his son dearer! Truth to tell thee, the grief hath *crazed my wits!*”—shattered perception.

He goes to Lear. “What a night’s *this!* I do *beseech* Your Grace—”

“Oh, I cry your mercy, sir!” Lear frowns at the earl’s interruption; he had been listening carefully to the simple sage, and now he turns back to Tom. “Noble philosopher, your company,” he requests courteously.

“Tom’s a-cold!”

Gloucester tugs at Tom’s arm. “*In*, fellow!—there, into the *hovel*; keep thee warm!”

“Come, let’s in *all*,” says Lear, weak and unsteady.

But Kent urges him toward Gloucester. “*This* way, my lord.”

“With *him*,” insists Lear, as Tom cowers. “I will keep with my philosopher still.”

Kent appeals to Gloucester. “Good my lord, soothe him: let him bring the fellow!”

Gloucester nods, grasping Lear’s arm. “Bring you him on.”

Kent puts an arm around Tom’s shoulders. “Sirrah, come on; go along with us!”

“Come, good Athenian,” Lear tells the madman, as they move toward the castle.

“No words, *no words!*—*hush!*” insists Gloucester; the earl must return to his own dwelling in stealth.

Edgar does not relish this homecoming: “Childe Rowland to the dark tower has come,” Tom mumbles. “Word was ever ‘*Fie, foh, fum!*—I smell *blood* of a British man....’”

**I**n the quiet of the castle, Lord Cornwall has finished reading the clandestine letter found in Gloucester’s room. “I will have my *revenge* ere I depart his house!” vows the duke grimly. Edmund, who provided the missive, appears to be torn by guilt. “My lord, how I may be *censured*, for that my nature thus gives way to *loyalty*, something fears me to think of!”

Cornwall considers Edgar’s alleged plot against the earl: “I now perceive it was not altogether your brother’s *evil disposition* that made him seek his father’s death, but a provoking *merit!*—set *a-work* by the reprobable badness in himself.”

“How malicious is my fortune, that I must *repent* being *just!*” moans Edmund. “This is the letter Edgar *spoke* of—which *approves* him a party to the intelligent advantages of *France!*”—a spy. “*O heavens*, that this *treason* were *not!*—or not *I* the detector!”

Cornwall heads to the door. “Go with me to the duchess.”

“If the matter of this paper be *certain*,” says Edmund, following, “you have mighty business in hand!”

The duke pauses. “True or false, it hath made *thee* Earl of Gloucester. Seek out where thy father is, so that he may be ready for our apprehension.”

Edmund nods. *If I find him comforting the king, it will stuff his suspicion more fully!* “I will persevere in my course of loyalty, though the conflict be *sore* between that and *my blood!*”

“I will lay trust upon thee, and thou shalt find a *dearer* father in *my love!*”

He goes to confer with his wife; the obsequious bastard follows.

Gloucester shepherds Lear and his three companions into a low, dark building where surplus and outdated furnishings are stored for the nearby castle.

“Here is better than the *open air*; take it thankfully,” he says. “I will piece out thy comfort with what addition I can; I will not be long from you.”

Kent leads Lear, who is lost in a reverie, to a dusty, plain chair of dark-stained pine. “All the powers of his wits have given way to his impatience,” Kent tells Gloucester quietly. “May the gods reward your kindness!”

But the lord of the manor is already hurrying away, hoping his absence has not been noticed, and relying on Edmund to keep the duke distracted.

It seems that Tom’s demoniacal pursuers have awakened. “Frateretto calls me!—and tells me Nero is an angler in the lake of darkness!” He peers into the shadows. “*Pray, innocent!*—and beware the foul fiend!”

At the torch, Kent has lighted three candle stubs; he places one on a box beside Lear, and gives another to the fool.

“Prithee, Nuncle, tell me whether a *madman* be a gentleman or a yeoman.”

“A king, a *king!*”

The fool shakes his head. “No; he’s a yeoman that has a gentleman as his *son*—for he’s a *mad* yeoman that sees his son become a gentleman *before* him!”

But Lear has not heard; he wants his two despised daughters consigned to demons like Tom’s: “To have a thousand, with red, *burning spits*, come *hissing in* upon ’em!—”

- “The foul *fiend* bites my back!” cries the beggar.

- The faded fool mumbles to himself mournfully. “*He’s mad* that trusts in the *tameness* of a wolf, a horse’s *health*, a boy’s *love*, or a *whore’s oath*....”

“It shall be done!” declares Lear. “I will *arraign* them *straight!*”

“Come,” he says to the mad vagrant, “sit thou here, most learned *justice!*”

“Thou, *sapient* sir, sit here!” he tells the fool.

The judges crouch beside the graybeard’s battered seat. He rises and clears a space among the stacks of old furniture, then pulls two stools to the front. “*Now, you she-foxes!*”

Says Tom, gaping up at Lear, “Look where he stands and *glares!*” He turns to the stools before them: the downcast defendants. “Wantest thou *eyes* for trial, madam? ‘*Come o’er the bourn, Bessy, to me,*’” he sings.

The fool replies with a snatch of rascally song:

““*Her boat hath a leak,  
And she must not speak  
Why she dare not come  
Over to thee!*””

Even Tom winces at the mention of menses. “The foul fiend haunts poor Tom in the *voice* of a *nightingale*.” His stomach grumbles. “Hopdance cries in Tom’s belly for two white herring! Croak not, dark angel!—I have no food for *me!*”

Kent asks Lear, softly, “How do you, sir? Stand you not so amazed. Will you lie down, and rest upon the cushions?” He has put together a makeshift bed by the wall.

“I’ll see their *trial* first,” Lear replies. “Bring in the *evidence!*” He turns to the lunatic, wrapped in his damp blanket. “Thou robèd man of justice, take thy place. And thou, his yoke-fellow of equity, bench by his side,” he tells the fool. They pull chairs toward him.

He fetches another one, for Kent, “You are o’ the commission; sit you, too.”

Tom regards Lear. "Let us deal *justly*. 'Sleepest or wakest, thou jolly shepherd, thy sheep be *in the corn!* For but one blast of thy minikin mouth, thy sheep had taken no *harm.*'" He looks at the stools. "*Purr!*—the cat is *gray*"—neither white nor black.

"*Arraign her first!*" orders Lear. "'Tis *Goneril*—I here take my oath before this honourable assembly, she *kicked* the poor king, her *father!*"

The fool motions to the empty dock. "Come hither, mistress. Is your name Goneril?"

"She cannot deny it!" says Lear.

The fool tells the arraigned, wryly, "Cry you mercy—I took you for a *joint-stool!*"—a stock gibe at one who is silent.

Lear's glance shifts. "And here's *another* whose warped looks proclaim what *stone* her *heart* is made of!" But then he blinks, startled, at the first stool: "*Stop her there! Arms, arms!—sword! Fire! Corruption* in the place!" He turns on Tom. "*False justicer!*—why hast thou let her *'scape?*" He looks around, gripped with anguish, then drops onto his chair, sobbing.

Says the madman softly, "Bless *thy* five wits."

Kent goes to Lear. "*Oh, pity!*" He kneels beside the chair. "Sir, where is the *patience* now, that thou so oft have boasted to retain?"

Tom turns away. *My tears begin to take his part so much they'll mar my counterfeiting!*

Lear points, childlike and tremulous. "The little dogs and all, Tray, Blanch, and Sweet-heart—see, they *bark* at me!" He rises and backs away fearfully.

Edgar drops to his hands and knees, and crawls forward to confront the menace. "Tom will throw his head at them! *Avaunt, you curs!*

"Be thy mouth or black or white,  
Tooth that poisons if it *bite*,  
Mastiff, grey-hound, mongrel grim,  
Hound or spaniel, brach or him,  
Or bobtail tike or trundle-tail—  
*Tom* will make them *weep and wail!*

For, with throwing thus my head"—he leans back and howls at the ceiling—

"Dogs leap the hatch—and all are *fled!*

"*Do dee, dee, dee! Cessa!*" Slowly he rises and smiles at the others. "Come, march to *wakes* and *fairs* and *market-towns!*"—places to beg. But then he looks away sadly. "Poor Tom, thy cup is *dry...*"

Lear wants to resume trial of the remaining defendant. "Then let them anatomize *Regan*—see what *breeds* about her heart! Is there any cause in *Nature* that makes these hearts hard?"

He regards Tom warmly. "You, sir, I'd entertain for one of my hundred!—only I do not like the fashion of your garments. You will say they are *Persian* attire, but let them be changed."

Kent gently takes his arm. "Now, good my lord, lie here and *rest* awhile."

Lear is too tired to resist. "Make no noise, make no noise; draw the curtains." He yawns, easing himself down, wearily, onto the mismatched cushions in the nearly dark corner. "So, so, so. We'll go to supper i' he morning. So, so... so." Almost immediately he is asleep.

"And I'll go to bed at noon," adds the fool dryly.

The candles flicker as Gloucester enters, quickly closing the door on the blustery night.

"Come hither, friend," he says to Kent. "Where is the king my master?"

"Here, sir; but trouble him not; his wits are gone."

"Good friend, I prithee, take him up in thy arms!" says Gloucester urgently. "I have o'erheard a plot of *death* upon him!" He nods toward the door. "There is a litter ready; lay him in't and drive towards *Dover*, friend, where thou shalt meet both welcome and protection!

"Take up thy master!—if thou shouldst dally *half an hour*, his life, with thine and all that offer to defend him, stands assurèd of *loss!* Take up, *take up!*—and *follow me!*—I will give thee quick conduct to some provision!"

Kent goes to Lear. “Oppressed nature sleeps! This *rest* might yet have balmed thy broken senses, which, if convenience will not allow, stand in hard cure!

“Come,” he says to the fool, “help to bear thy master; thou must not stay behind!” Together they lift the old man and carry him to the door.

Gloucester takes the torch and urges them forward to the horse-drawn cart outside. “Come, come, *away!*”

Edgar watches them go. He closes the door as Gloucester hurries back into the castle, and the wagon trundles off through the night toward the dark road south.

He ponders:

*When we see our betters bearing our woes,  
We scarcely think our miseries our foes.  
Who alone suffers suffers most i' the mind,  
Leaving happy shows and free things behind.  
But when grief hath mates, bearing in fellowship,  
Then much suffering the mind doth over skip!  
How light and portable my pain seems now,  
When that which makes me bend makes a king to bow!*

Edgar shakes his head. *He childed as I fathered!*

He puts out the candles. *Tom, away! Mark the high's noise, but thyself bewray!* He will continue in disguise.

*False Opinion, whose wrong thought defiles thee, in thy proof just repeals and reconciles thee!*

*What e're more may hap tonight, safe 'scape the king!*

He opens the door cautiously. *Lurk, lurk....*

## Chapter Nine Dark Reunions

Lord Cornwall now commands in castle; the earl's servants attend the duke in the main hall. He tells Lady Goneril, “Post speedily to my lord your husband! Show him this letter. *The army of France is landed!*” His anger rises as he directs two men: “*Seek out the villain Gloucester!*”

“Hang him instantly!” says Regan.

“Pluck out his eyes!” cries Goneril.

“Leave him to *my* displeasure,” Cornwall replies dourly. “Edmund, keep you our sister-in-law company; the revenges we are bound to take upon your traitorous father are not fit for your beholding.

“Where you are going, advise the duke to a most festinate preparation!” he tells Goneril. “We are bound to the like.” The Duke of Albany must rally forces quickly, then come here to fight the invaders. “Our posts shall be swift with intelligence betwixt us.

“Farewell, dear sister!

“Farewell, my lord of Gloucester,” he tells Edmond.

Cornwall looks to the doors as Oswald rushes in. “How now? Where's the king?”

“My lord of Gloucester hath *conveyed him hence!* Some five or six—and *thirty* of his *knights*, hot questrists after him—met him at gate, who, with some other of the lord's dependants, are gone with him towards *Dover*—where they boast to have well armèd *friends!*” he adds, pointedly.

The duke waves him away. “Get horses for your mistress!”

“Farewell, sweet lord, and sister!” says Goneril, leaving for her northern palace.

“Edmund, farewell!” says Regan as they go.



The duke now frowns, furious over the escape. “Go seek the traitor Gloucester!” he tells a knight. “*Pinion* him like a *thief*! Bring him before us!

“Though well we may not pass upon his life without the *form* of justice,” he tells Regan, “yet our *power* shall do a courtesy to our wrath which men may *blame*, but not *control*!

“Who’s there? The *traitor*!”

“Ingrateful fox!—’tis *he*,” says Regan, as two men escort Gloucester to the duke; a third walks behind him.

“Bind fast his corky arms,” Cornwall tells the guards.

“What mean Your Graces?” asks Gloucester. “Good my *friends*, consider you are my *guests*! Do me no foul play, friends!”

“*Bind* him, I say!” commands the duke. The men do so, tying the earl’s arms behind him.

Regan moves closer, urging them to pull the cord tight. “Hard, hard!” She stands before the earl. “*O filthy traitor!*”

“Unmerciful lady as you are, I’m *none*!”

“*To this chair* bind him,” says Cornwall, and soon the earl is so confined. “Villain, thou shalt find—”

“Lady, by the kind gods, ’tis most *ignobly* done, to pluck me by the beard!” cries the earl, eyes watering from the sting. Regan has grasped Gloucester’s beard and pulled sharply and hard.

The duchess shakes whiskers in her fist. “So *white*, and such a *traitor*!”

“Lady, these hairs, which thou dost ravish from my chin, will quicken”—come alive—“and *accuse* thee! I am your *host*!—with *robbers*’ hands my hospitable favours you should not ruffle thus! What will you do?”

“Come, sir,” says Cornwall, “what letters had you lately from *France*,—”

“Be *simply* answered,” demands Regan, “for we know the truth!”

“—and what *confederacy* have you with the traitors late footed in the kingdom?”

“To whose hands have you sent the lunatic king?” demands Regan. “*Speak!*”

Gloucester replies, “I have a letter *guessingly* set down, which came from one that’s of a *neutral* heart, and not from one opposed....”

Cornwall sneers. “*Cunning*.”

“And *false*!” says Regan.

“Where hast thou sent the king?”

“To Dover.”

“Wherefore to Dover?” cries Regan. “Wast thou not charged at peril—”

“Wherefore to *Dover*? Let him first answer *that*!”

Gloucester realizes his collusion is obvious. “I am tied to the stake, and I must stand the course.”

“*Wherefore to Dover*, sir?” cries Regan.

Gloucester bursts out, angrily, “Because I would not see *thy cruel nails* pluck out his poor old *eyes*—nor thy fierce *sister* in his anointed flesh stick *boarish fangs*!

“With such a storm as *his bare head* in a hell-black night endured, the *sea* would have buoyed up, and *quenched stellar fires*! Yet, poor old heart, he *holp* the heavens to rain!

“If *wolves* had howled at thy gate that stern time, thou shouldst have said, ‘Good porter, turn the key!’”—open the door, “‘else all cruel’s *endorsèd*!’

“But I shall see the wingèd *Vengeance overtake* such children!”

Cornwall, enraged, moves forward. “*See’t* shalt thou *never*! Fellows, hold the chair! Upon these eyes of thine I’ll *set my foot*!” He reaches for the old man’s face.

Gloucester calls to the white-faced servants nearby, “He that will think to live till *he* be old, *give me some help*!”

But with a thumb and finger, the duke gouges out an eyeball, drops it to the stone floor, and crushes it beneath his boot.

“*Oh, cruel!*” gasps the injured man, straining in torment against his bonds. “*O you gods!*” he shrieks, blood running down his cheek from the socket.

“One side will *mock* another,” says Regan. “The other too!”

Cornwall moves again. “If you *see* Vengeance—”

“Hold your *hand*, my lord!” cries an attendant. “I have served you ever since I was a child, but better service have I never done you than *now* to bid you *hold!*”

Regan is livid. “*How now, you dog!*”

The man is revolted by the lady’s viciousness. “If you did wear a beard upon your chin, I’d shake it on this quarrel! *What do you mean?*”

“*My villain!*” mutters Cornwall, drawing his sword.

The man draws his sword. “Nay, then, come on, and take the chance of *anger!*” he cries.

The steel blades clash in fierce combat—and to his vast surprise, the duke is wounded as they fight.

“Give me thy sword,” Regan demands of another servant. “*A peasant* to stand up thus!” She raises the sword with both hands and runs it into the back of the duke’s opponent.

“*Oh!*—I am *slain!*” groans the stabbed attendant, staggering. “My lord,” he breathes to Gloucester, “you have one eye left, to see some mischief on him!” He cries out again as Cornwall’s blade pierces his chest—“*Oh!*” He falls, and lies dead on the floor.

Cornwall hurls down his sword and again confronts the agonized earl. “Lest it see *more, prevent* it! *Out, vile jelly!*” He pries away his helpless victim’s eye, bloodying his other hand. “Where is thy lustre *now?*” he cries, pressing down his foot.

Gloucester, shocked, sags in the hard chair, warm blood streaking his white beard. “All dark and comfortless,” he groans. “Where’s my son *Edmund*? Edmund, *enkindle* all the sparks of Nature to *’quit this horrid act!*”

“*Out, treacherous villain!*” laughs Regan. “Thou call’st on him that *hates* thee!—it was *he* that made the overture of thy treasons to us!—he who is too good to pity *thee!*”

“Oh, my *follies!*” cries Gloucester. “Then Edgar was *abusèd!* Kind *gods, forgive* me that!—and *prosper him!*”

“Go thrust him out at gates!” Regan orders the servants, “and let him *smell* his way to Dover!” She sees that Cornwall is bleeding. “How is’t, my lord? How look you?”

“I have received a hurt,” he says, a hand clasped at his side. “Follow me, lady!”

“*Turn out* that eyeless villain!” he orders the still-stunned servants. He shouts, kicking the corpse, “Throw *this* slave upon the dunghill!”

His instructions are followed, silently. The cord is untied, and Gloucester, barely able to stand, is led away, stumbling. The dead man is carried outside.

“Regan, I bleed *apace,*” Cornwall complains. “Untimely comes this hurt! Give me your arm....”

Followed by their attendants, she leads him to the knights’ quarters; their squires are trained in treating wounds.

Two of Gloucester’s aging servants remain in the hall; they stare down, aghast, at the gory aftermath of the visitors’ fury.

“I’ll never care what wickedness *I* do, if *that* man come to good!” says the pale husband.

“If *she* live long, and in the end meet the course of death *old,* women will all turn *monsters!*”

They had fed poor Tom when he begged at the kitchen door. Says the man, “Let’s follow the earl, and get the *Bedlam* to lead him where he would; this *roguish madness* allows itself do *anything!*”

“Go thou,” says the wife. “I’ll fetch some flax and whites of eggs to apply to his bleeding face.

“Now, *Heaven,* help him!”

Tom o' Bedlam is hiding in the woods across the way from Lord Gloucester's estate. The rain has passed, but as dawn arrives, Edgar is loath to move about where he is well known—and where many now search for the fugitive.

*Yet better thus, and known to be condemnèd, than flattered but still condemnèd! Being worst, the lowest and most dejected thing of Fortune stands ever in esperance, lives not with fear. The lamentable change is from the best; the worst returns to laughter!*

*Welcome, then, thou insubstantial air that I embrace! The wretch that thou hast blown unto the worst owes his nothing to thy blasts!*

In the dim twilight, he notices movement at the gate to the muddy road. *But who comes here?* Cautiously, he edges closer. *My father, poorly led!*

He sees the cloth wrapping Gloucester's face. *O world, world, world!—but that thy strange mutations make us hate thee, life would yield to age!*

A wizened old servant holds the earl's arm, guiding him along. "Oh, my good lord, I have been your tenant, and your father's tenant, these fourscore—"

"Away, get thee away," urges Gloucester gently. "Good friend, be *gone!* Thy comforts can do me no good at all; *thee* they may hurt!"

"Alack, sir, you cannot see your way!"

"I *have* no way, and therefore need no eyes. I *stumbled* when I saw! Full oft 'tis seen: our means assure us, but our mere *defects* prove to be our commodities!"—currency of exchange. "*O dear son Edgar*, the book of thy abused father's wrath! Might I but live to see thee in my *touch*, I'd say I had eyes again!"

Tom is silently crossing toward them. The servant looks up, startled. "How now! Who's there?" He has courage, but he dreads—wisely—being seen helping the earl.

Edgar, closer now, sees his father's stained bandage, and the blood-spattered doublet. *O gods! Who is't can say, 'I am at the worst'? I am but worse than ever I was!*

"'Tis poor mad Tom," the ancient tells Gloucester.

Edgar looks to see if they are observed. *And worse I may be yet! The worst is not, so long as we can say this is the worst!*

"Fellow, where goest?" the servant asks Tom.

"Is it a beggar-man?" says Gloucester.

"*Madman*—and beggar, too."

"He has *some* reason, else he could not beg. In the last night's storm I saw such a fellow, who made me think a *man* a *worm!* My son came then into my mind, and yet my mind was then scarce *friends* with him. I have heard more since.

"As flies to wanton boys are, we to the *gods,*" says Gloucester sadly. "They kill us for their sport."

Edgar can only wonder what has occurred. *How should this be?* He laments his disguise: *Bad is the trade that must play Fool to Sorrow, angering itself and others!* "Bless thee, master!"

"Is that the naked fellow?" The earl knows Tom has nothing to lose, and no reason to remain here.

"Aye, my lord."

"Then, prithee, get thee gone! If, for my sake, thou wilt o'ertake us—hence a mile or twain, i' the way toward Dover—do it for ancient love, and *bring some covering* for this naked soul, who I'll entreat to lead me."

Watching skittish Tom glance around, seemingly at random, the servant has doubts. "Alack, sir, he is mad!"

Gloucester only nods. "'Tis the time's plague, when madmen lead the blind. Do as I bid thee, or rather do *thy* pleasure; above the rest, be *gone!*" he pleads, already feeling the warm but revealing rays of the rising sun.

"I'll bring him the best apparel that I have, come on't what will!" The man returns to the castle, stepping carefully to avoid wide puddles in the rutted road.

“Sirrah, naked fellow—”

Tears steam down Edgar’s face. “Poor Tom’s a-cold.” *I cannot daub it further!*

“Come hither, fellow.”

*And yet I must!* “Bless thy sweet eyes, they bleed....”

“Know’st thou the way to Dover?”

“Both stile and gate, horse-way and foot-path! Poor Tom hath been scared out of his good wits! Bless the goodman’s son, from the foul *fiend!* And so bless *thee*, master!”

Gloucester unties a pouch at his waist. “Here, take this purse, thou whom the heavens’ plagues have humbled to all strokes. “That *I* am wretched makes *thee* the happier.” He tips his face toward the sun. “*Heavens*, deal so!—let the superfluous and lust-fed man who still enslaves your ordination—who will not *see* because he doth not *feel!*—feel your power *quickly*, so that distribution should undo *excess*, and *each man have enough!*”

Blind Gloucester reaches out, finds Tom’s arm, and grasps it. “Dost thou know Dover?”

“Aye, master.”

“There is a cliff, whose high, unbending head looks fearfully into the confinèd deep. Bring me but to the very brim of it, and I’ll repair the misery thou dost bear with something rich about me. From that place I shall no leading need.”

“Give me thy arm. Poor Tom shall lead thee,” says Edgar cheerfully; but his tears are flowing again.

Father and son set off together, south to the white, seaward cliffs of Dover.

**A** way to the north, Lady Goneril and Lord Edmund—the new Earl of Gloucester—have arrived outside the Duke of Albany’s palace. They stand at the front doors; men are coming to walk their horses to the stable.

“*Welcome*, my lord,” she says. “I marvel our mild husband not met us on the way!” She sees Oswald, who rode ahead of them, come out of the impressive building. “Now where’s your master?”

“Madam, within.” The steward is perplexed. “But never a man so *changèd!* I told him of the *army* that was landed; he *smiled* at it! I told him *you* were coming; his answer was ‘the *worse.*’ Then, when I informed him of Gloucester’s *treachery*, and of the loyal service of his *son*, he called me *sot*, and told me I had *turned the wrong side out!*

“What most he should dislike seems *pleasant* to him; what like, *offensive!*”

Goneril turns to Edmund. “Then you shall go no further. It is the cowish terror of his spirit, that dares not *undertake!* He’ll not *feel* wrongs which tie him to an *answer!*

“My *wishes* along the way may prove *effects,*” she murmurs. “Back, Edmund, to my brother-in-law; hasten *his* musters and conduct of his powers! *I* must *exchange* arms at home, and give the *distaff* into my husband’s hands!

“This trusty servant shall pass between us.” Oswald bows; he has served her before in this delicate capacity. She regards the tall, handsome young earl. “Ere long you are likely to hear, if you dare venture in your own behalf, a *mistress*’s command!

“Wear this; spare speech,” she says, unclasping a necklace. “Decline your head.” She reaches up, holding the elegant gold chain and pendant, her arms encircling his neck. “This kiss, if it durst speak, would stretch thy spirits up into the air!” Her lips linger on his. “*Understand,*” she tells him, “and fare thee well!”

Bowing, Edmund pledges his commitment: “*Yours*, even in the ranks of death!” He takes up the reigns of his steed.

“My most dear Gloucester!” breathes Goneril as he rides away. “Oh, the difference of man and man! To *thee* a woman’s services are *due*; my fool *usurps* my body!”

“Madam, here comes my lord,” warns Oswald.

She frowns at Albany. “I have been *worth the while!*” she says, peeved at his failure to meet her.

The duke laughs bitterly. "Oh, Goneril, *you* are not worth the *dust* which the rude wind blows in your face! I am wary of *your* disposition: that nature which condemns its *origin* cannot be bordered certain in *itself*—she that herself will sliver and disbranch from her material sap perforce must *wither*—and come to *deadly* use!"

Goneril would silence him. "No more; the text is foolish."

"Wisdom and goodness to the *vile* seem vile," he replies. "*Filths* savour but themselves.

"*What have you done?*" he demands angrily. "*Tigers*, not *daughters*, what have you *performèd*? A father, and a gracious, agèd man, whose reverence even a hard-luggèd *bear* would lick, have *you*—most *barbarous*, most *degenerate!*—*maddèd!*

"Could my good brother-in-law *suffer you to do it?*—to a man—a *prince!*—that him *so* *benefited!* If that the *heavens* do not their visible spirits send quickly down to tame these *vile offences*, it will come that humanity must perforce *prey on itself*, like monsters of the deep!"

She is utterly contemptuous: "*Milk-livered* man!—that bear'st a cheek for *blows*, a head for *wrongs!*—who hast not in thy brows an eye discerning thine *honour* from thy *suffering!*

"Know'st not that *fools* pity those villains who are punished *before* they have done their mischief?"

"*Where's thy drum?*" she demands harshly. "*France* *spreads his banners* in our noiseless land! With plumèd helm *thy slayer* begins *threats!*—whiles *thou*, a moral *fool*, still *sittest*, and criest, '*Alack*, why *does* he so?'"

"*See thyself*, devil!" cries Albany. "*Deformity itself* seems not so horrid in the *fiend* as in *woman!*"

"O vain *fool!*"

Albany shakes his head angrily. "Thou changèd and self-coveting thing, for *shame!*

"Be-*monster* not thy feature!—were't my fitness to let these *hands* obey my *blood*, they are apt enough to *dislocate* and *tear thy flesh and bones!* Howe'er thou art a *fiend*, a woman's *shape* doth shield thee!"

Goneril scoffs. "Your *manhood!* Marry, *mew!*"

A dusty messenger rides toward them, his horse wet from long running. The man leaps down from the saddle, hurries to the duke, pulling the reins behind, and bows.

"What news?" asks Albany.

"Oh, my good lord, the Duke of Cornwall's *dead!*" cries the messenger, "slain by his *servant*, going to put out the other eye of *Gloucester!*"

"Gloucester's *eyes!*"

"A servant that he bred, thrillèd by remorse, *opposed* against the act, bending his sword to his great master!—who, thereat *enragèd*, flew at him, and amongst them *felled him dead!*—but not without that harmful stroke which since hath *plucked him after!*"

Albany looks upward. "This shows you *are* above, you *justicers*, that these our nether crimes so speedily can *avenge!* But, oh, *poor Gloucester!* Lost he his other eye?"

"Both, *both*, my lord!" The messenger turns to Goneril. "This letter, madam, craves a speedy answer! 'Tis from your sister." He hands her the sealed paper.

*One way I like this well!* she thinks. The king has fled, and Cornwall—joint ruler with her husband—is dead.

She pictures Regan—with Edmund. *But being a widow—and my Gloucester with her....* Jealousy arises. Still, Goneril is determined; and she has taken steps. *May all the building in my fancy pluck up my miserable life!*

*And another way the news is not so hard*, thinks the duchess. Her spouse is now Britain's wartime commander; his life will be in peril. "I'll read, and answer," she says, going inside.

"Where was his *son* when they did take his eyes?" the duke asks the rider.

"Come with my lady hither."

Albany frowns. "He is not here."

"No, my good lord; I met him going back again."

“Knows he the *wickedness*?”

“*Aye*, my good lord!—’twas *he* informed *against* him!—and quit the house on purpose that their punishment might have the freer course.”

Albany stares. Appalled and angry, he makes a solemn vow: “Gloucester, I’ll live to *thank thee* for the love thou showedst the king!—and to *revenge* thine eyes!”

He motions to the rider. “Come hither, friend. Tell me what more thou know’st!”

## Chapter Ten Cliffs of Dover

French soldiers busily pull tents onto poles, raise them, and drive stakes into the grassy fields to secure the canvas, thus enlarging their sprawling encampment around the British headlands at Dover. Ships from France teem in the port, even as more vessels arrive, bringing men, horses and supplies to swell the invasion force.

Kent, still in disguise, has reached the coast with Lear’s party, and he has found the courtly gentleman who bore his messages and ring to Cordelia. “Why has the King of France so suddenly gone back? Know you the reason?” he asks.

“Something he left imperfect in the state, which since his coming forth is thought of, and imports to the kingdom so much fear and danger that his personal return was most required and necessary.”

“Who hath he left behind him as general?”

“The Marshal of France, Monsieur La Far.”

“Did your letters pierce the queen to any demonstration of grief?”

“*Aye*, sir! She took them, read them in my presence—and now and then an ample *tear* trilled down her delicate cheek! It seemed she was a queen over her passion—which, most *rebel*-like, sought to be king o’er her!”

“Oh, then it *moved* her”—made her angry.

“Not to a rage: *sorrow* and *patience* strove as to which should goodliest express her. You have seen sunshine and rain at once; her smiles and tears were the like—in a *better* way! Those happy smilets that played on her ripe lips, which parted, seemed not to know what guests were in her diamond *eyes*, as pearls dropped from thence!

“In brief: sorrow would be a rarity most *belovèd*, if all could so become it!”

“Made she no verbal question?”

“Faith, once or twice she heaved forth the name of *Father*, pantingly, as if it pressed her heart—cried, ‘Sisters! *Sisters?*—*shame* of ladies!

“‘*Sisters! Kent! Father!*

“‘*Sisters, what?*—i’ the *storm?*—i’ the *night?*—let *pity* not be *receivèd?*’

“Then she shook the holy water from her heavenly eyes, in clamour moistened, and away she started, to deal with grief alone!”

Kent remembers Cordelia’s cruel sisters. “It is the *stars*, the stars above us, that govern our conditions; else one’s self and mate could not beget such *different issues!* You spoke not with her since?”

“No.”

“Was this *before* the king returned?”

“No, since.”

“Well, sir, the poor distressèd Lear’s i’ the town—who sometimes, in his better tune, remembers what we are come about, but by no means will yield to see his daughter.”

“*Why*, good sir?”

“A sovereign *shame* so bows him,” says Kent. “His own *unkindness*, that stripped her from his *benediction*, turned her to *foreign* hospitality, gave *her* dear rights to his *dog-hearted*

daughters—these things sting his mind so venomously that burning shame detains him from Cordelia.”

“*Alack*, poor gentleman!”

“Of Albany’s and Cornwall’s powers heard you not?”

“’Tis so!—they are afoot!”

“Well, sir,” says Kent, “I’ll bring you to *our* master, *Lear*, and leave you to attend him.

“Some dear cause will in concealment wrap me up awhile; when I am known *aright*, you shall not grieve lending me this acquaintance!

“I pray you, go along with me.” His friend nods agreement.

Queen Cordelia arrives under the French colors, flown on a staff carried by soldiers who march to the compelling sound of a regiment’s drums. Sunlight glows through high, angled slopes of stretched white canvas as she enters the busy field-command tent at Dover, near the lighthouse. She has learned that Lear—who fled, in his distraction, leaving behind his fool and knights—has just been spotted.

“*Alack*, ’tis *he!*” she tells the physician brought here to help him. “Why, he was met even now!—as mad as the vexèd sea, *singing aloud!*—crownèd with rank fumiter and furrow-weeds!—and garnished with burdocks, hemlock, nettles, cuckoo-flowers, darnel, all the idle weeds that grow among our sustaining wheat.

“A century send forth!” she commands. “Search every *acre* in the high-grown fields, and bring him to our eye!” An officer bows and goes to dispatch the hundred soldiers.

“What can *Man’s wisdom* do, in the restoring his bereavèd sense?” she asks the doctor. “He that *helps* him take all my outward worth!”

“There is means, madam,” he tells her. “Our foster-nurse in Nature is *repose*—the which he lacks! That to provoke in him are many simples operative,”—drugs, “whose power will close the eye of anguish.”

“O all blest *secrets*, all you unpublished *virtues* of the earth, spring forth with my *tears!*” says Cordelia. “Be *aidant*, and *remediate* in the good man’s distress!

“Seek, seek for him,” she tells the doctor, “lest his ungovernèd rage *dissolve* the life that wants the means to *lead* it!”

A messenger enters the tent, salutes the officers, then comes to bow before the queen. “*News*, madam: the British powers are *marching hitherward!*”

Cordelia nods. “’Tis known before; our preparation stands in expectation of them.”

She prays. *O dear Father, it is thy business that I go about; therefore great France my mourning and importunèd tears hath pitied. No blown ambition doth our arms incite, but love, dear love, and our aged father’s right!*

*Soon may I hear and see him!*

Oswald has delivered Goneril’s new letter to her sister. Following the death of her husband, Lady Regan has marshaled Britain’s southern army and its militias, assembling them near the Earl of Gloucester’s castle.

“But are my brother-in-law’s powers *set forth?*” she asks. Hourly, the French navy is delivering more troops, transported twenty miles across the water to occupy areas around the port of Dover. Her forces will need help of the Duke of Albany’s mustered troops.

“Aye, madam.”

“Himself in person there?”

Oswald frowns. “Madam, with much *ado!* Your *sister* is the better *soldier.*”

“Lord *Edmund* spake not with your lord at home?”

“No, madam.”

“What might import my sister’s letter to him?”

He lies. “I know not, lady.”

She is annoyed. "Faith, he was posted hence on *serious matter!*"

She paces. "It was great *ignorance*, Gloucester's eyes being out, to let him *live!* Where he arrives he will move all hearts *against us!* I think Edmund has gone, in *pity* of his *misery*," she says with deliberate irony—"to *dispatch his nighted life!* Moreover, to descry the strength o' the enemy."

Oswald wants to go. "*I must needs after him, madam, with my letter!*"—Goneril's urgent message to Edmund.

Regan faces the steward, a kindly smile masking her jealousy. "Our troops set forth tomorrow," she says. "Stay with *us*; the ways are dangerous."

"I may not, madam; my lady chargèd my *duty* in this business."

"Why should she *write* to Edmund?—might not you transport her purposes by *word?*" she asks. "Belike, something—I know not what...." She steps closer to the popinjay. "I'll love thee *much*—let me unseal the letter!"

"Madam, I had rather—"

"I know your lady does not love her *husband!*—I am *sure* of that!—and at her late visit here she gave strange *oeillades*"—glances—"and most speaking *looks* to noble Edmund! I know you are of her bosom...."

"I, madam?"

"I speak in understanding—you *are*, I know't! Therefore I do advise you, take note of *this*: my lord is *dead*; Edmund and I have talked—and more convenient is he for *my* hand than for your lady's! You may gather *more*," she says, eyes flashing. "If you do find him, pray you give him *this*," she says, handing him a letter of her own. "And when your mistress hears thus much from you, I pray, desire her call her *wisdom* to her!"

"So, fare you well."

The steward bows and starts to go.

"If you do chance to hear of that *blind traitor, preferment* falls on him that *cuts him off!*"

"Would I *could* meet him, madam!" says Oswald. "I should show what party *I* do follow!"

But Regan has already turned away, to a table covered with maps of the Kentish lands near the coast. "Fare thee well."

Gloucester and Edgar walk near Dover. The outlaws' apparel, ill-fitting and faded, is a servant's, made of dark, coarse cotton cloth, their stockings of dull wool; each of their faces is shadowed by the wide brim of a weathered hat.

The weary old man staggers forward, leaning, with each step, against his oaken staff. His sweat-soaked bandages have been discarded, in the harsh sunlight, revealing dark sockets.

"When shall we come to the top of that same hill?" he asks Tom.

"You do climb up it now; look how we labour!"

Gloucester limps on. "Methinks the ground is even."

"Horrible steep," says Edgar. "Hark, do you hear the sea?"

"No, truly."

"Why, then, your other senses grow imperfect by your eyes' anguish."

"So may it be; indeed, methinks *thy voice* is altered, and thou speak'st in better phrase and matter than thou didst."

"You're much deceivèd; in nothing am I changed but in my garments."

Gloucester smiles, despite his pain; bearing responsibility has improved the young vagabond with him. "Methinks you're better spoken."

They trudge on.

Finally, they reach the chalk cliffs, which rise almost four hundred feet, looming above the shore. "Come on, sir," says Edgar, "here's the place. Stand still." He grasps his father's arm, tugging at it a bit as he leans forward to look down.



“How fearful and dizzying ’tis, to cast one’s eyes so low!” he gasps, in awe. “The crows and choughs that wing the midway air show scarce so gross as *beetles*; halfway down hangs one that gathers samphire—*dreadful* trade! Methinks he seems no bigger than his *head*!

“The *fishermen* that walk upon the beach appear like *mice*!—and yond tall anchoring ship is diminished to her *rowboat*—her boat to a *buoy*, almost too small for sight!

“The murmuring surge, that on the unnumbered idle pebbles chafes, cannot be heard so high!

“I’ll look no more,” he says fearfully, “lest my brain *turn* and, deficient in sight, *topple down headlong*!”

“Set me where *you* stand.”

“Give me your hand... you are now within a foot of the extreme verge. For *all beneath the moon* would I not leap *upright*!” says Edgar, edging back.

“Let go my hand,” says Gloucester. “Here, friend, is another purse—in it a *jewel* well worth a poor man’s taking! Fairies and gods *prosper* thee with it!

“Go thou farther off,” he says, gently waving his companion back. “Bid me farewell, and let me hear thee going.”

Edgar moves away. “Now fare *you* well, good sir...”

The suffering old man is resigned and resolute. “With all my heart!”

Gloucester pulls off his hat. Painfully, bending first one knee, then the other, he kneels. “O you mighty gods, *this* world I do renounce, and, in your sights, shake patiently my great affliction off. If I could bear it *longer*, and not fall to quarreling with your great, opposeless wills, my snuffed and loathed part should by nature burn itself out.

“If *Edgar* live,” he says, voice cracking in anguished regret, “oh, *bless* him!”

He labors to rise, unsteadily, toward the searing sun. The staff falls behind him.

“Now, fellow, fare thee well,” he whispers. Mind reeling in exhaustion, overwhelmed with pain and sorrow, he falls forward—tumbling from his own darkness into a deep, black abyss.

Edgar nods. “Gone. Sir, *farewell*,” he says quietly, to the prideful lord of days gone by. Then he hurries, filled with concern, to his father, who is prostrate on the soft soil a few feet away. *Why do I trifle thus with his despair? It’s done to cure it!*

Gently, he rolls the old man onto his side.

*And I know not yet how, when life yields itself to a theft, belief may rob the treasury of life. Had he been where he thought, by now he had been past thought!*

Edgar’s voice assumes a bright new identity. “Alive or dead?” He rubs Gloucester’s hands. “*Ho!*—you, sir! *Friend!* Hear you, sir! *Speak!*”

*Thus might he pass, indeed... Yet he revives!* “What are you, sir?”

Gloucester groans. “Away, and let me die!”

The stranger sounds astonished. “Hadst thou been aught but *gossamer, feathers*, sir, so many fathom down precipitating thou’dst have *shattered like an egg*! But thou dost *breathe*—hast *heavy* substance; *bleed’st* not, *speak’st*—art *sound*!” He turns his head upward. “*Ten* masts atop *each* make not the altitude which thou hast perpendicularly fell!

“Thy life’s a *miracle*!

“Speak yet again!”

Gloucester’s head throbs; he is still dazed. “But have I *fall’n*, or no?”

Edgar helps him to sit up. “From the dread *summit* of that chalky bourn! Look up a-*height*!—the shrill, gorged lark cannot be *seen or heard* so far!—do but look up!”

“Alack, I have no eyes. Is wretchedness deprived of that *benefit*?—to *end* itself by *death*...” He moans. “’Twas yet *some* comfort, when *misery* could not beguile the tyrant’s rage, to frustrate his proud *will*.”

“Give me your arm. *Up!*—so. How is ’t? Feel you your legs? You *stand*...”

*Withstand*, think the earl. “Too well, too well.”

The passerby is still in awe. “This is *above* all *strangeness!*” Then he asks, in a hush: “Upon the crown o’ the cliff, what *thing* was that which parted from you?”

“A poor unfortunate beggar.”

“As I stood here below,” says the amazed witness, “methought his *eyes* were *two full moons!* He had a *thousand noses*, whelkèd *horns!*—hair that wavèd like the *enragèd sea!* It was some *fiend!*”

“Therefore, thou happy father, think that the *clearest gods*, who make of *men’s* impossibilities their *honours*, have preservèd thee!”

Gloucester holds his aching head—and recalls the horror of falling. “I do remember, now. Henceforth I’ll bear affliction till *it* do cry out *itself*, ‘Enough, *enough!*’ and die!

“That *thing* you speak of—I took it for a *man!*—often ’twould say, ‘The *fiend*, the *fiend!*’ He *led* me to that place!”

“Bear free and *patient* thoughts,” urges Edgar kindly. As they stand near the shore, between the towering white walls of rock and the flat, steel-gray sea, the young man brushes grass from his father’s coat. He looks up to see a solitary wanderer ambling along the beach, bareheaded and coatless—with wildflowers adorning his hair and his disheveled clothing.

“But who comes *here?*” wonders Edgar aloud. “The *safer* sense”—reason—“will ne’er accommodate its master *thus!*”

“No, they cannot touch *me* for *coining*,” laughs Lear as he comes closer. “*I* am the king *himself!*”

Edgar stares. “*Oh*, thou *sight*-piercing sight!”

“*Nature’s* above *art* in that respect,” says Lear sadly, stopping near the two paupers. He has just fled from a tent full of soldiers; and as memory swirls in a fitful reverie, shards of the past appear in his troubled mind. A royal youth discovers the martial world then around him:

- “There’s your impress-money!”—a conscript is paid.

- “That fellow handles his bow like a *crow-keeper!* Draw me a *clothier’s yard!*”

- “‘Look, look, a *mouse!*’ Peace, peace; this piece of toasted cheese will do ’t!

- “There’s my *gauntlet!* I’ll prove it ’gainst a *giant!*”

- “Bring up the brown bills!”—troops bearing halberds.

- “*Oh, well flown*, bird! I’ the clout, *i’ the clout!*”—an arrow has struck the center of its target.

Now Lear starts, and clutches at his side. “*Hewh!*”—the pained gasp of a man wounded in battle.

He blinks, and sternly regards the others. “Give the word!”—password.

Murmurs Edgar, stunned, “Sweet marjoram....”

“Pass!”

Sightless Gloucester stirs. “*I know* that voice....”

Mutters Lear, “*Humph!* Goneril, with a *white beard!*” He recalls his long, imperious reign. “They flattered me like a dog; and told me I had white hairs in my beard ere the *black* ones were there!—‘*aye*’ and ‘*nod*’ with everything I said! *I* nodded, too—that was not good *divinity!*”

“When once the rain came to *wet* me, and the wind to *make me chatter!*—when the thunder would not peace at my *bidding*—there I *found* ’em!—*there I smelt* ’em out!

“*Go to!* They were not *men o’ their words!* They told me I was *everything!*”

“’Tis a *lie!*—I am not *ague-proof!*” he cries angrily.

Gloucester grasps Edgar’s arm. “The trick of that voice I do well remember! Is’t not the king?”

“*Aye*, every *inch* a king!” says Lear.

With effort, Gloucester kneels.

Lear laughs. “When *I* do stare, see how the subject *quakes!* I pardon that man’s life,” he says, motioning toward the earl. “What was *thy* case? *Adultery?*”

Gloucester, stricken yet again, lowers his head.

“Thou shalt not die. *Die for adultery? No! The wren goes to 't, and the small, gilded fly does lecher in my sight! Let copulation thrive!*”

He thinks. “For Gloucester’s *bastard son* was kinder to his father than my daughters got ’tween the *lawful sheets!*”

“*To't! Luxury, pell-mell!—for I lack soldiers!*”

Turning seaward, his expression dour, he scorns hypocrisy—in women: “Behold yond simpering dame whose *face* presages *snow* between her forks, who minces *virtue*, and does shake the head, hearing *pleasure named*. Not the *fitchew* nor the soiled *horse* goes to't with a more *riotous appetite!*”

“From the waist down they are *centaurs*, though women all above; only to the waist do the *gods* inherit—*beneath* is all the *Fiend's!* There’s *Hell!*—there’s *darkness*; there’s the *sulphurous pit!*—*burning, scalding, stench!*—*consumption! Fie, fie, fie!*”

He spits—twice. “Good apothecary, give me an ounce of civet,”—perfume, he says, disgusted, “to *sweeten* my *imagination!* There’s money for thee!” He pulls silver coins from a pocket and hands them to Edgar.

Loyal old Gloucester feels only pity for the despoiled monarch. “Oh, let me kiss that hand!”

Lear is still. “Let me wipe it first. It smells of mortality.”

Edgar places the oak staff in Gloucester’s hand, and the nobleman rises, painfully, to his feet. “Oh, ruined piece of Nature! This great *world* shall so wear out to nought! Dost thou know me?”

“I remember thine *eyes* well enough; thou dost stare at me.” Lear looks again—and suddenly he backs away. “*No!* Do thy worst, blind *Cupid*, I’ll not *love!* Read thou *this* challenge!” he growls, grasping his crotch. “Mark but the *penning* of it!” *Pen* is a common term for penis.

Gloucester, unseeing, says sadly, “Were all the letters *suns*, I could not see *one.*”

Thinks Edgar, *I could not take this by report! It is, and my heart breaks at it!*

“*Read!*” demands Lear.

Gloucester removes his hat and raises a hand to touch his own bruised face. “What?—with the *case* of eyes?”

Lear perceives the injuries. “*Oh, ho!*—are you there with *me?*—no eyes in your head. Nor no money in your purse!” He nods, sagely. “Your eyes are in a heavy case, your purse in a light; yet you see how *this* world goes!”

Gloucester nods. “I see it *feelingly.*”

“What, art *mad?* A man may see how the world goes with no eyes—look with thine *ears!*—‘See’ how yond justice rails upon yond simple thief! Hark in thine *ear!* Change their *places*—and, handy-dandy, which is the justice, which is the thief?”

“Thou hast seen a farmer’s dog bark at a beggar?”

“Aye, sir.”

“And the creature *run* from the cur? *There* thou mightst behold the great image of *authority:* a *dog’s* obeyed in office!

“Thou, rascal *beadle*, hold thy *bloody hand!* Why dost thou lash that whore? Strip thine *own* back; thou *lust’st hotly* to use her in that kind for which thou *whipp’st* her!

“The *usurer* hangs the *cozener!*”

“Through *tattered* clothes *small* vices do appear; robes and furrèd gowns *hide all!* *Plate* sin with *gold*, and the strong lance of Justice *hurtless* breaks; *armor* sin with rags, a pigmy *straw* does pierce!

“None does *offend!*—*none*, I say!—*none!* I’ll *enable* ’em!”

He pulls gold coins from a pocket and puts them into Gloucester’s hand. “Take *from* me, my friend, that which has the power to *seal the accuser’s lips!* Get thee *glass* eyes—and like a scurvy politician, *seem* to see the things thou dost not!

“Now, now,” he sighs, suddenly weary. “Now, now.” He sits down on a large rock, facing the sea. “Pull off my boots,” he says faintly—to a squire of long ago. “Harder, *harder;*” he tells

Edgar, who is accommodating him. “So.” Lear sifts sand through his fingers, watching as the finer dust drifts away in the gentle breeze coming off the water.

*Oh, matter and impertinency mixèd!* thinks Edgar. *Reason in madness!*

“If thou wilt weep thy fortunes, take *my* eyes,” Lear tells the blind man. “I know thee well enough; thy name is Gloucester. Thou must be *patient*—we came crying hither, thou know’st; the first time that we *smell the air*, we wawl and cry.”

He stands, lifts the his circlet of flowers from his head, and slides it over an arm. “I will preach to thee; mark!”

“Alack, *alack* the day!” moans Gloucester.

“When we are born, we cry because we are come to this great stage of *fools!*”

Lear pauses, frowning at Gloucester’s crumpled hat. “*This* is a good block.” But an idea occurs to him: “It were a delicate stratagem to *shoe* a troop of horse with *felt!*”

“I’ll put ’t in proof,” he chuckles, rubbing his hands together gleefully, “and when I have stol’n upon these *sons-in-law*—then, kill, kill, kill!” he rages. “*Kill, kill, kill!*”

## Chapter Eleven Discovery, Reconciliation

**T**hrough the woods and fields of corn and wheat outside Dover, four French corporals, with eighty-some soldiers straggling listlessly behind, search for the queen’s father as if he were a criminal furtively evading the law.

A wise gentleman of Lear’s former court has instead come here, to the shore, seeking an angry man—one who would roar to the sea and sky, demanding justice.

The tall courtier has found Lear, bootless, and with no doublet covering his pale shirt, in the company of two peasants—and once again venting his fury. He tells two attendants, “Here he is; lay hand upon him.”

They approach Lear cautiously—and with deference, having never dared cross, let alone touch, a monarch.

The gentleman speaks: “Sir, your most dear daughter—”

Lear is startled—and fearful. “No *rescue? What, a prisoner?*” he cries. “I am ever the natural fool of Fortune! Use me *well!*—you shall have *ransom!*” he tells the men. “Let me have surgeons; I am cut to the brains!” he moans.

The gentleman bows, smiling kindly. “You shall have *anything!*”

Lear looks around for help. “No *seconds? All myself?* Why, this would make a man—a man of salt!—to use his eyes for garden *water-pots!*—aye, and for laying autumn’s dust!”

“Good sir—”

Lear stands erect. “I will die bravely, like a bridegroom!” he says defiantly—with a jest on *die* as ejaculation. “*What?*—I *will* be jovial! Come, come, I am a *king*, my masters—know you *that!*” he insists.

“You *are* a royal one, and we obey you. . . .”

Lear’s eyes narrow. “Then there’s *life* in’t! Nay, if you get it, you shall get it with *running!*” he cries, suddenly dashing away—and with surprising energy—leaving a fragile trail of flowers and weeds. “*Çà, çà!*”—*there, there!*—a call to hounds pursuing a fox. “*Çà—çà, çà!*” he gibes, gleefully, as the sweating attendants give chase.

Thinks the frustrated courtier, watching them scramble, *A sight most pitiful in the meanest wretch!*—*past* speaking of *in a king!* He calls: “Thou hast *one* daughter who *redeems* Nature from the general curse which *twain* have brought her to!”

But the barefoot maniac continues to elude his pursuers, whose heavy boots slow them in the sand.

As they all dash away, out of sight around the base of a hill, Edgar, who has not yet ventured into the town, approaches the courtier. "Hail, gentle sir!"

"Sir, 'speed you. What's your will?" The gentleman intends to return to Queen Cordelia, and wait for Lear, inevitably, to be brought to her.

"Do you hear aught, sir, of a *battle* toward?"

"Most surely! In the vulgate: everyone hears *that* who can distinguish *sound!*"

"But, by your favour," says the young country man, hat in hand, "how near's the other army?" Edgar's immediate concern is for the safety of his injured father.

"*Near*, and on speedy foot!—main thought stands on a descry *hourly*." British forces to challenge the French are expected soon.

"That's *all*?" Edgar, surprised, bows. "I thank you, sir."

The gentleman shakes his head in dismay. "Though that the queen on *special cause* is here, her army is *moved on!*" He dreads the imminent conflict that endangers so many: the British men led by Cornwall and Albany, and the queen's French troops. With a nod, he treads away along the beach.

Edgar bows again humbly. "I *thank* you, sir."

Old Gloucester has grown penitent. He faces upward. "You ever-gentle gods, take my breath from me!"—listen. "Let not my worser spirit tempt me again to die before you please!"

"*Well* pray you, father," says the gentle stranger.

The blind nobleman asks, "Now, good sir, who *are* you?"

"A most poor man, made tame to Fortune's blows; who, by the art of *knowing* and *feeling* sorrows, am pregnant to *good pity*."

"Give me your hand; I'll lead you to some biding"—a place to wait in safety.

"Hearty thanks! The bounty, and the *benison*, of heaven—to boot, and *boot!*"

Oswald has not yet found Edmund; still, he is very pleased. Sword drawn, he stalks up quietly behind Gloucester and Edgar, just as they are about to begin their further flight, away from the dangers of warfare.

"A proclaimed *prize!* Most *happy!* That eyeless head of thine was first framed flesh to raise my fortunes!" cries Oswald. "Thou old, unhappy *traitor*, briefly thyself remember—the sword is out that must *destroy* thee!"

Gloucester turns to him. He no longer seeks death, but he no longer fears it. "Now let thy friendly hand put *strength* enough to't!"

Oswald moves closer, tilting the point of his blade toward Gloucester's chest. He waves intervening Edgar aside. "Wherefore, bold peasant, darest thou support a published *traitor?* Hence, lest that the infection of his fortune take like hold on *thee!* Let go his arm."

But the ignorant rustic lifts his staff. "Ch'Ill not let go, zir, without vurther 'casion!"

"Let go, slave, or thou *diest!*"

The bumpkin raises wood in opposition to steel. "Good gentleman, go your gait, and let poor volk pass. If I chud ha' bin *zwaggered* out of my life, 'twould not ha' bin zo long as 'tis by a vortnight!" He steps forward. "Nay, come not near th' old man; keep out, che vor ye,"—I warn you—"or I'se try whether your *costard* or my *balow*"—your head or my blow—"be the harder! Ch'I'll be plain with you!"

Angered by such impudence, Oswald tips back his blade. "Out, *dunghill!*" he cries, with a sudden thrust.

The peasant is too fast; he dodges.

Oswald now draws a dagger with his left hand—but the rude staff flies out, knocking it to the sand.

Edgar picks up the knife. "Ch'I'll pick your *teeth*, zir!" he grins. "Come, no matter vor your foins!"—the thrusts don't worry him.

Furious, Oswald makes a deadly rush forward, slashing viciously with his sword, but it strikes only the heavy staff. Edgar has crouched as he warded off the blow—and he swings the dagger upward.

Stopped and startled, Oswald looks down to see the black haft protruding below his chest. He falls back, staring at it.

His eyes close, then open. “Slave, thou hast slain me!” He gapes at his knife in him, and struggles to turn onto one side. “Villain, take my purse,” groans the steward. “If ever thou wilt thrive, bury my body, and give the letters which thou find’st about me to *Edmund*, Earl of *Gloucester*! Seek him out among the British party.” He gasps sharply, blood now spilling from his mouth as he tries, but fails, to pull out the dagger. “Oh, untimely *death!*” He falls back, his sightless gaze fixed on the clear sky.

“I know thee *well*: a *serviceable* villain!” says Edgar, bending to close the eyes, “as duteous to the vices of thy mistress as badness would desire!”

Gloucester asks his new guardian, “What, is he dead?”

Edgar is looking at the corpse. “Sit you down, father; rest you. Let’s see these pockets; the *letters* that he speaks of may be my friends! He’s dead; I am only sorry he had no other death’s-man.

“Let us see,” he says, a sealed letter in hand. “By your leave, gentle wax—and manners, blame us not! To know our enemies’ minds, we’d rip their *hearts!*—their papers is more lawful.”

He reads aloud: “‘*Let our reciprocal vows be remembered! You have many opportunities to cut him off; if your will want not, time and place will be fruitfully offered!*”

“‘*There is nothing done if he return the conqueror—then am I a prisoner, and his bed my jail! From the loathed warmth whereof deliver me—and supply a place for your labour!*”

“‘*Your—wife, so I would say!—affectionate servant, Goneril.*’

“Oh, undistinguished spice of *woman’s will*—a *plot* upon her *virtuous husband’s life!*”  
*And the exchange my brother!*

Edgar looks down at Oswald. “Here in the *sands* I’ll rake up thee—the post unsanctified of *murderous lechers!* And in the mature time, with this ungracious paper strike the sight of the death-practised duke! For him, ’tis well that of thy death and business I can tell!”

As Edgar works, Gloucester’s shakes his head in despair. “The *king* is *mad*. How is *my* vile sense *stiff*, that it stand up and have ingenious *feeling* of my huge sorrows? Better I were *distract!* So should my *thoughts* be severed from my griefs, and woes, by wrong imaginings, lose the knowledge of themselves.”

The corpse is quickly covered, hidden under the hot sand.

“Give me your hand,” says Edgar. “Far off, methinks I hear the *beaten drum!* Come, father, I’ll bestow you with a friend.”

Crabs, drawn by the smell of death, scuttle to dig into the new mound.

L ear rests, peacefully asleep under a clean sheet on a padded cot, as a physician leans closer to observe his breathing. At the doctor’s nod, soft lute music resumes.

Waiting with Queen Cordelia here in the shade beside one of the French regiment’s tents are Kent and the gentleman who found her father rambling in near-delirium.

“Oh, *thou*, good Kent,” she says, “how shall I live and work to match thy goodness? My life will be too short, and every measure fail me!”

Kent bows. “To be *acknowledged*, madam, is *o’erpaid*; all my reports go with the modest truth: nor more nor clipped, but so.”

Cordelia smiles, touching the earl’s sleeve. “Be better suited; these clothes are memories of those worsen hours! I prithee, put them off.”

He would demur. “Pardon me, dear madam; yet to be known shortens my made intent. My *boon* I make it that you know me not”—conceal his identity—“till time as I think meet.” For the earl, even here at home in Kent, proper restitution can only come from a revived King Lear.

“Then be't *so*, my good lord!” She turns to the physician. “How does the king?”

“Madam, sleeps still.”

“O you kind gods, *cure* this great breach in his abused nature!” she prays. “The untuned and jarring senses *mend up* in this father changed to child!”

“So please it Your Majesty that we may wake the king?” asks the doctor. “He hath slept long.”

Cordelia nods. “Be governed by your knowledge, and proceed i' the sway of your own will. Is he arrayèd?”

“Aye, madam,” says the gentleman. “In the heaviness of his sleep we put fresh garments on him.”

They follow the queen into the tent.

“Be by, good madam, when we do awaken him,” says the doctor. “I doubt not of his temperance,” he assures her.

“Very well.”

“Please you, draw near.” He tells the lutenist, “Louder, the music there.”

Cordelia approaches the cot. “Oh, *my dear father!*—may restoration hang medicine on my lips, and let this kiss repair those violent harms that my two sisters have in thy reverence made!” She kisses his forehead.

- Whispers Kent “Kind and dear princess!” The gentleman beside him nods.

Cordelia smooths Lear's hair. “Had you not been their *father*, these white flecks had compellèd *pity* in them!” His visage, once robust, is lean and pale. “Was *this* a face to be opposed against the *warring winds?*—to stand against the deep, dread-bolted *thunder*, in the most terrible and nimble stroke of quick, cross *lightning?* To watch—poor *perdu!*—with *this thin helm?*

“Mine *enemy's dog*, though it had *bit* me, should have stood *that* night beside my fire! And wast *thou*, poor Father, fain to hovel thee with swine and rogues, *forlorn* in short and musty *straw?* *Alack, alack!* 'Tis wonder that thy *life and wits at once* had not concluded all!

“He *wakes!*” she says, turning quickly to the doctor. “Speak to him!”

“Madam, do *you*,” he urges. 'Tis fittest.”

“How does my royal lord?” asks Cordelia softly. “How fares Your Majesty?”

He moans, weakly. “You do me wrong to take me out o' the grave.” Lear opens his eyes, and slowly looks up. In the glow he sees a blurry, heavenly vision. “Thou art a soul in bliss, but I am bound upon a *wheel of fire*, such that mine own *tears* do scald like moulten lead!”

“Sir, do you know me?” she asks.

“You are a *spirit*, I know; when did you die?”

Cordelia's eyes search his face. “Still, still, far wide....”

“He's scarce awake,” says the doctor. “Let him alone a while.”

Lear peers around the tent, hung with regiments' regalia and other emblems of France.

“Where have I been? Where *am* I?” He blinks. “Fair daylight....”

He shakes his head, much vexed. “I am mightily *abused!*—I should die of *pity* e'en to see *another* thus!” He looks down, perplexed. “I know not what to say; I will not swear *these* are *my* hands! Let's see.” He pulls back the sheet and grasps a pin fastening it to his cot. “I feel this pin's prick! Would I were assured of my condition....”

Cordelia comes to his side. “Oh, look upon me, sir, and hold your hands in benediction o'er me!” She moves back as Lear rises to his feet; then, slowly, he goes to his knees before her. “No, sir, *you* must not *kneel!*”

“Pray, do not *mock* me,” he pleads. “I am a very *foolish*, fond old man!—fourscore and upward,” he says earnestly, still dazed. “Not an hour more nor less,” he adds, trying to sharpen his thoughts. “And, to deal plainly, I fear I am not in my perfect mind.”

He looks from Cordelia to Kent. “Methinks I should know you, and know this man. Yet I am doubtful, for I am mainly ignorant what place this is; and all the skill I have remembers not these garments. Nor do I know where I did lodge last night....”

He tilts his head to stare up at the queen; at her smile, his countenance brightens hopefully. “Do not laugh at me!—but, as I am a man, I think this lady to be my child *Cordelia!*”

“And so I *am!* I *am!*” she cries, overwhelmed.

“Be your tears *wet?* He gently reaches to touch her cheek. “Yes, ’faith!

“*Weep not,* I pray.” He hangs his head. “If you have poison for me, I will drink it. I know you do not love me. For, as I do remember, your sisters have done me wrong; *you* have some *cause,* they have not.”

Cordelia’s tears flow again as she caresses his hand. “No cause, no cause!”

Kent and the gentleman ease Lear to his feet. He looks around the tent. “Am I in France?”

“In your own kingdom, sir,” says Kent.

Lear groans pathetically; he has no kingdom. “Do not *abuse* me!” he sobs.

Cordelia, worried, looks to the doctor. “Be comforted, good madam,” he tells her. “You see: the great *rage* is killed in him.

“And yet it *is* a danger to take him again o’er the time he has lost. Desire him to go in; trouble him no more till further settling.”

“Will’t please Your Highness walk?” she asks Lear kindly.

“You must bear with me. Pray you now forget, and *forgive!*” he pleads, tearfully. “I am old and foolish!”

She takes his hand and helps him to move forward. Together, father and daughter enter the clean and luminous space.

**T**he disguised lord and his friend watch calmly as, all about them, soldiers rush past, making frenetic preparation for imminent warfare.

“Holds it true, sir, that the Duke of Cornwall was so slain?” asks the courtier.

“Most certain, sir.”

“Who is conductor of his people?”

“As ’tis said, the bastard son of Gloucester.”

The gentleman smiles—wryly. “They say Edgar, his banished son, is with the Earl of Kent in *Germany.*”

Kent shrugs. “Report is changeable.” His hand rests on the hilt of his sword as he surveys the assembling army. “’Tis time to *look about;* the powers of the kingdom approach apace.”

“The arbitrement is like to be bloody. Fare you well, sir.” The tall gentleman turns and goes into the French queen’s tent.

Kent listens: to the leathery creaking of saddles being fitted, dry gird and harness being buckled; to horses’ strident neighs protesting interrupted grazing, and their shuffling hoofbeats as army equipment is dropped heavily onto their backs. He hears the clacking of scabbards, shields, and spears.

*My point and period will be thoroughly wrought, for well or ill as this day’s battle’s fought!*

## Chapter Twelve War and Conflict

**L**ord Albany has finally arrived with his army, but coordination of the British forces has been contentious. Edmund, irked and impatient, summons a southern sergeant. “Know of the duke if his last purpose *hold!*—or whether he is since advised by aught to *change* the course. He’s full of alteration and self-reproving; bring his *constant* pleasure!” The man bows and hurries away.

Regan, too, craves information; Oswald has not brought news. “Our sister’s man is certainly miscarried!”

Edmund nods. “’Tis to be feared, madam.”



“Now, sweet lord, you know the goodness I intend upon you; tell me *truly*—then speak but the truth”—reply as inamorato, then frankly. “Do you not love my sister?”

“In *honorable* love,” he replies, with dignity.

She raises an eyebrow. “But have you never found my *brother-in-law’s* way to... the forfended place?”

Edmund seems to feel wounded. “That thought abuses you!”

Her doubts are hardly allayed. “I suspect that you *have* been conjunct—and bosomed with her as far as we call *hers!*”

“No, by mine *honour*, madam!”

Regan has accurately assessed his honor. “I never shall *endure* her! Dear my lord, *be not familiar with her!*”

“Fear me not,” says Edmund soothingly.

They hear a military escort’s drums, and he turns to the tent’s opening. “She and the duke, her husband.”

Albany and his duchess come in, leading a contingent of officers and attendants. Goneril sees that Edmund is with Regan. *I had rather lose the battle, she thinks, than that sister should loosen him and me!*

Albany says to Regan—with cold contempt, “Our *very loving* sister-in-law, be well met.” He turns to Edmund. “Sir, this I hear: the *king* has come to his *daughter*—with *others* whom the *rigor* of our state forces to cry out!” The cruelty inflicted upon Gloucester has aroused many nobles who now side with those that would restore Lear to the throne.

Says the duke, “Never yet was I *valiant* where I could not be *honest*. As for *this* business, it toucheth *us* because *France invades our land*; it is *not* a challenge to the *king*—who with others, in most *just* and *heavy causes*, I fear, does oppose us!”

“Sir, you *speak* nobly,” says Edmund dryly.

Regan would dispute sharply the duke’s sympathy for Lear and his supporters: “Why is *this* reasoned?”

But Goneril objects to further talk: “*Combine together* ’gainst the *enemy*,” she insists, “for these domestic and particular broils are not the question here!”

Albany, reservations notwithstanding, will not tolerate an invasion from Gaul. But he intends—after expelling the French—to restore civility to the governance of southern Britain. “Let’s then determine our proceedings, with the ensigns of war.” Their chief military advisor, a colonel, and his assistants have already drawn tactical maps.

Edmund nods. “I shall attend you immediately at your tent.” The new Earl of Gloucester bows and goes. He is eager to settle the united forces’ plans—and his own.

Regan gestures toward her own tent. “Sister, you’ll go with us.” It is not a question.

“No.” Goneril intends to wait here for Edmund’s return.

“’Tis most convenient, pray you, *go with us.*”

*Oho, I know the riddle!* thinks Goneril sourly. The rivals intend watch each other—closely. “I will go.” The well-dressed ladies glide, in elegant enmity, out of the tent.

As Albany follows, he encounters a rustic young man, battered hat in hand, waiting outside and bowing nervously to the amused sentries. The peasant approaches the duke.

“If e’er Your Grace had speech with man so poor, hear me one word!” entreats Edgar.

The duke tells the sisters, “I’ll overtake you.” He regards the pauper. “Speak.”

Edgar hands him Goneril’s message to Edmund. “Before you fight the battle, *ope this letter!* If you have *victory*, let thy *trumpet* sound for him who brought it; wretched though I seem, I can produce a champion who will *prove* what is avouchèd there!”—proof by *combat*: he craves the chance to challenge his half-brother, under rules of chivalry, at sword-point.

“If you *miscarry*,” says Edgar, “your business in the world hath so an end, and machination ceases.” He puts on his hat, and turns to go. “May Fortune love you!”

“Stay till I have read the letter...”

“I was forbid it,” says the fugitive. “When time shall serve, let the herald but call, and I’ll appear again.”

For now, Albany’s attention is devoted to the coming clash of armies. “Well, fare thee well. I will o’erlook thy paper.”

Edgar bows, and slips away through the camp of British troops busily preparing for battle.

Edmund returns, bringing important news: “*The enemy’s in view! Draw up your powers!*” He hands Albany the colonel’s report. “Here is the guess of their true strength and forces, by diligent discovery. But your *haste* is now urged on you!”

“We will greet the time,” says Albany grimly, striding away; war is at hand—in part a civil war.

Edmund, alone, ponders. *To both these sisters have I sworn my love, each as wary of the other as the stung are of the adder! Which of them shall I take? Both? One?*

*Or neither? Neither can be enjoyed if both remain alive! To take the widow exasperates, makes mad her sister, Goneril—and hardly shall I carry out my side, her husband being alive!*

*For now, then, we’ll use his countenance for the battle—which being done, let her who would be rid of him devise his speedy taking off!*

*As for the mercy which he intends to Lear and to Cordelia: the battle done, within our power they shall never see his pardon!*

*For my state stands on me to defend, not to debate!*

**T**rumpets blare boldly, colorful banners wave aloft, and soldiers march gallantly to the determined cadence of military drums. Suddenly two massive forces of men meet, yelling fiercely and running to collide in furious violence. On each side, shields of wood and hide are pushed forward to deflect the enemy’s pike and club, sword and knife.

Edgar has managed to keep Gloucester clear of the fighting so far, and has led him into a wood at one edge of the fray.

“Here, father, take the shadow of this tree for your good host,” he says, looking around carefully. He kneels to help the blind man hide within the green brush around a gnarled bole. “Pray that the right may thrive!” says Edgar. “If ever I return to you again, I’ll bring you comfort.”

Gloucester settles back to wait. “Grace go with you, sir!”

Crouching cautiously, the outlaw moves forward to observe, from within the dense stand of old trees, the course of this conflict.

In their charges against invaders, many Britons die, valiantly defending the fields of Kent; men who sailed here from Calais—loyal to their queen, intending to restore her father to his throne—perish in a foreign land.

Battle prayers—sent up by gentlemen in bright armor, commoners in thin cotton and drab wool—succeed or fail in either tongue. The gasps of the stricken and cries of the injured, the groans of the dying and silence of the dead—all enunciate the universal language of war.

**G**loucester hears someone rushing toward him through the forest. “*Away, old man!*” cries Edgar. “Give me thy hand—*away!* King Lear hath *lost*, he and his daughter are *taken!* Give me thy hand! Come on!”

But Gloucester does not move. “No farther, sir. A man may rot even here.”

“What, in ill thoughts *again?* Men must endure their going hence even as their coming hither; *ripeness* is all. Come on!” says Edgar, taking his father’s hand and pulling him gently to his feet.

Gloucester nods as he stumbles forward. “And that’s true, too.”

As prisoners, with their hands bound, Lear and Cordelia are led through a copse of slender elms and into the British military encampment near the castle of the banished Earl of Kent. A captain and four infantry soldiers bring them to Edmund.

The camp is crowded after the battle: there with the regular-army troops are many others, young and old, pulled only days ago from their towns and farms by ducal command—conscripted into the fight. Most were born under the reign of King Lear, and in the past, all have pledged fealty to him; their officers are nobles and gentlemen drawn from across his realm. The Britons now wait, watchful, impatient to learn what their victory will mean—for them, and for these royal prisoners.

“Some officers take them away!” orders Edmund, still in armor as he stands outside the tent from which he has commanded the victorious southern forces. His fear is not that the two captives will escape, but that they will be set free by the populace. “*Good guard,*” he commands loudly, “until their greater pleasures first be known who are to censure them.” Any who are discontented can blame the duke and duchesses.

The captain sends a lieutenant to secure ten additional troops—hardened soldiers.

The French queen is quietly resigned. “We are not the first who, with best meaning, have incurred the worst,” she tells Lear. “For *thee*, oppressed king, am I cast down—myself could else out-frown false Fortune’s frown.” She looks around, surprised that Regan and Goneril are not here. “Shall we not see these *daughters?*—these *sisters?*”

Lear recoils: “*No, no, no, no!*” His storm of anguish has subsided, and he no longer veers between petulance and pained perception; but he dares not revisit his nightmare. “Come, let’s away to prison! We two alone will sing like birds i’ the cage!” He smiles at her with the simplicity of a favored child. “When thou dost ask me *blessing*, I’ll kneel down, and ask of thee *forgiveness!*”

“So we’ll live—and *pray*, and *sing*, and *tell old tales!*—*laugh at gilded butterflies*, and hear the poor rogues talk of *court* news! Then *we’ll* talk of them too: who *loses* and who *wins*; who’s *in*, who’s *out*—and take upon’s the *mystery* of things as if we were gods’ *spies!*”

“And, in a wallèd prison, *we’ll* wear out *packs* and *sects* of *great* ones, that ebb and flow by the *moon!*”

Edmund sees onlookers gathering, drawn to see the regal prisoners. “Take them *away,*” he orders impatiently. The soldiers move into position, forming a cordon.

Says Lear, “Upon such sacrifices, my Cordelia, the gods *themselves* throw incense!” He grasps her hand happily. “Have I caught thee?” he asks, blissful in her mere presence. “He that parts *us* must bring a brand from *heaven!*—and *fire* us hence like foxes!”

His soul scourged, his demons at bay, Lear straightens proudly, aware of being surrounded by enemies. “Wipe thine eyes! The good years shall *devour* them, flesh and hide, ere they shall make *us* weep! We’ll see ’em *starved* first! Come.”

Well armed soldiers guard an old man and a young woman. The former King of Britain and the present Queen of France are marched away.

Edmund summons a stolid new officer, and takes him aside. “Come hither, *captain.* Hark,” he says, handing the man a document, “take thou this note. Go, follow them to prison.”

To avoid being overheard, Edmund speaks quietly—but with intense urgency. “*One step* I have advanced thee; if thou dost as this instructs thee, thou dost make thy way to *noble fortunes!*”

“Know thou this: that men are as *the time* is; to be tender-*minded* does not become a *sword!* Thy great employment will not bear question; either say thou’lt *do* it, or thrive by other means!”

The burly officer glances over the paper. “I’ll do’t, my lord.”

“*About* it!—and right happy when thou hast done!” As the henchman starts to go, Edmund seizes his arm. “*Mark:* I say *instantly!*—and carry it *so,* as I have set it down!”

The captain nods. "I cannot draw a cart, nor eat dried oats; if it be man's work, I'll do't." He clumps away on his dark mission.

A flourish of trumpets announces the arrival of the Duke of Albany, with Lady Goneril and Lady Regan; they are followed by several gentlemen, and a captain leading soldiers of the duke's northern guard.

"Sir, you have shown today your *valiant* strain," Albany tells Edmund stiffly, "and Fortune led you well. You have the captives who were the opposites of this day's strife; we do require them of you, so to use them as we shall find their merits and our safety may equally determine."

Edmund stalls. "Sir, I thought it fit to send the old and miserable king to detention, and appointed some guard," he says smoothly. He steps closer. "His *age* has *charms in it*—his title *more*—to pluck the common bosom to his side," he explains quietly, "and *turn* our impressèd lances,"—conscripted men, "even in our eyes who do command them!"

"With him I sent the queen, my reasons all the same.

"And they are ready to appear tomorrow, or at further space, where you shall hold your session."

Seeing Albany's frown, Edmund quickly argues further. "At *this* time we sweat and *bleed!*—the friend hath lost his *friend!*—and in such heat the *best* in *quarrels* are cursed by those who feel their *sharpness!* The question of Cordelia and her father requires a *fitter* place."

Lord Albany rejects the offered counsel. "Sir, by your patience, I hold *you* as but a *subject* of this war—not as a *brother!*"

But Lady Regan asserts her own authority. "That's as *we* choose to grace him!" The duchess scowls at the duke. "Methinks *our* pleasure might have been demanded ere you had spoken *so far!* He led *our* powers—bore the commission of *my* place and person!—a mediacy which may *well* stand up and call itself your brother!"

Lady Goneril objects to her sister's possessiveness. "Not so *hot!*—in his *own* grace he doth exalt *himself!*—more than in *your* addition!"

"In *my* rights, by *me* invested, he compeers the *best!*" insists Regan.

"That were the most if he should *husband* you," counters Goneril.

Regan's laugh is harsh. "Jesters do oft prove *prophets!*"

"The eye that told you *so* looked but a-squint!"

Regan, angry but pale, presses a hand against her own middle. "Lady, I am not well, from a full-flowing stomach, *else I should answer!*" She turns to Edmund. "*General*, take thou my soldiers, prisoners, *patrimony!*—dispose of them, of *me!* These walls"—Kent's castle—"are *thine!*"

"Witness the *world* that I create thee here *my lord and master!*"

Goneril is livid. "Mean *you* to enjoy him?"

The duke tells his wife, "*Then let it alone!*—it lies not in your good *will.*"

"Nor in *thine*, lord!" says Edmund.

Albany flushes. "*Half-blooded fellow, yes!*" he growls.

Regan tells Edmund, "Let the drum strike, and *prove* my title *thine!*"

"*Stay, yet!*" demands Albany loudly. "*Hear!*"

"Edmund, I *arrest* thee for *capital treason!*—and I arrest in thine attain *this gilded serpent!*"—his own wife.

The captain nods to his men; three burly soldiers move to stand near Edmund and Goneril.

"As for your claim, fair sister," the duke tells Regan, "*I bar it!*—in the interest of *my wife.*" 'Tis *she* who has *sub*-contracted to this lord, and I, her *husband*, *contradict* your banns!

"If you would *marry,*" he tells Edmund and Regan, "make your loves to *me!*—my lady is bespoken."

Goneril scoffs: "An *interlude!*"—comedic skit.

Albany stands, glaring, directly in front of Edmund. “Thou art *armed*, Gloucester; *let the trumpet sound!* If none appears to prove upon thy head thy *heinous, manifest*, and many *treasons*, there is *my pledge!*” He throws down a glove. “I’ll *prove* it on thy heart ere I taste bread: thou art nothing less than I have here *proclaimèd* thee!”

Regan, turning more pale, clutches at her stomach. “Sick!—oh, *sick!*” she groans.

*If not, I’ll ne’er trust medicine!* thinks Goneril. The potent drug she secretly dripped into Regan’s wine is indeed intended as a cure—for Goneril’s own green-eyed malady.

Edmund is defiant. “There’s my *exchange*,” he says, throwing down a gauntlet. “*Whatever* in the world he is who names me *traitor, villain-like he lies!*”

“Call, by thy *trumpet!*” he tells Albany. “He that dares approach, on him—on *you!*—who *not?*—I will maintain firmly my truth and honour!”

### Chapter Thirteen Further Fighting

A herald, *ho!*” calls Lord Albany.

“A herald, *ho, a herald!*” calls Edmund with assurance.

“Trust to thy *single* virtue,” Albany tells him, “for thy *soldiers*—all levied in *my* name—have in my name taken their discharge.”

Regan feels weak. “My sickness grows upon me!”

Albany turns to an older gentleman of his court. “She is not well; convey her to my tent.” The courtier bows and escorts Regan away.

“Come hither, herald,” says the duke as the man arrives. “Let the trumpet sound, and read out this.”

The herald speaks, loudly, the proclamation: “*If any man of quality or degree within the lists of the army will maintain upon Edmund, supposed Earl of Gloucester, that he is a manifold traitor, let him appear by the third sound of the trumpet!*”

“*He is bold in his defence.*” The herald nods to the trumpeter. “*Sound!*” A clarion call echoes out over the crowded camp.

After a minute, the herald says, “Again!”

A minute later—“*Again!*” The horn sounds a final summons to any challenger.

Now another horn replies.

The second trumpeter, one of the duke’s soldiers, comes forward through the throng, followed by a man in the full armor of a nobleman; the visor of his helmet is down, his face hidden.

Albany observes the protocol of chivalry. “Ask him his purposes, why he appears upon this call o’ the trumpet.”

“What are you?” the herald demands of the stranger. “Your name, your quality, and why you answer this present summons.”

“Know: my *name* is lost, by *treason*’s tooth bare-gnawn and canker-bit,” Edgar replies. “Yet am I noble as the adversary I come to cope.”

“Which is that adversary?” asks Albany.

“Who’s he that speaks as Edmund, ‘Earl of Gloucester?’” demands Edgar.

“Himself,” says Edmund. “What say’st thou to him?”

“Draw thy sword, so that if my speech offend a noble heart, thy arm may do thee justice!” He draws his blade. “Here is *mine*—behold it—with the privilege of mine honours, my oath, and my professing!

“I protest—despite thy strength, youth, place, and eminence; despite thy victor sword and fire-new fortune, thy valour and thy heart—*thou art a traitor!*—false to thy *gods*, thy *brother*, and

thy *father*; conspirant 'gainst this high, illustrious *prince*—and, from the extremest upward of thy head to the descent in dust below thy foot, a most *toad-spotted traitor!*

“Say thou ‘*No,*’ this *sword*, this *arm*, and my *best spirits* are bent to prove upon thy heart, whereto I speak, *thou liest!*”

Edmund has watched the other man, who is no less tall, but not as solid in build; his sword looks new, untested. “In wisdom I should ask thy name,” he says carelessly, “but, since thy outside *looks* so fair and warlike, and that thy tongue *some* might say of breeding breathes, what safety and delay I might well claim by strict rule of knighthood, I *spurn and disdain!*”

“*Back* do I toss these *treasons*, with the Hell-hated ‘*lie,*’ *to thy head*, to o’erwhelm thy *heart!*—where, though they yet glance by and scarcely bruise, this *sword* of mine shall *open instant way* to where they shall *rest forever!*” He pulls on his helmet and draws his broadsword. “Trumpets, *speak!*”

The horns signal the start of trial by combat.

The armored figures, both crouching, their long, gleaming blades held out before them, circle warily. Edmund, well trained with the sword in France, is confident; he waits for his opponent, almost certainly less experienced, to make a mistake.

Edgar’s ordeals have thinned him, and the borrowed armor feels loose; but he moves closer, his sword-point aimed unsteadily at Edmund’s breastplate. He pulls back a bit, rebalancing for a leap—but just as he starts forward, Edmund moves sharply aside, swiftly raising his heavy blade high for a powerful, helmet-shattering downstroke.

The sword drives earthward—but Edgar is not there, having pulled back after his feint. The end of Edmund’s blade digs into the sod; with an angry cry he jerks it free and lifts it high for a deadly blow. But Edgar’s ready sword flies forward just as the leather cuirass of Edmund’s armor rises, exposing an unprotected inch of midriff—and the sharp steel plunges in deep.

Edmund stands motionless—stunned. His sword drops beside him; he falls back, head striking the ground. Edgar steps forward slowly, and slides the bloody tip of his blade beneath the helmet, to his brother’s neck.

“*Save him!*” demands Albany, raising a hand. “*Save him.*” Edmund’s heavily bleeding wound will surely prove lethal; Edgar will benefit from showing restraint. And the duke wants to confront his cuckold.

Goneril runs to Edmund. “This is *a scheme*, Gloucester!” she tells him in disgust. “By the law of arms thou wast not *bound* to answer an *unknown* opposite!—thou art not vanquished, but *cozened* and *beguiled!*”

“Shut your *mouth*, dame,” demands Albany, “or with this *paper* I shall *stop* it!”

He steps before Edmund, who has raised himself onto an elbow, and shows him Goneril’s letter, retrieved from the dead steward. “Thou *worse than any name*, read thine own *evil!*” He seizes Goneril’s wrist as she reaches for the paper: “No tearing, lady!—I perceive you *know* it!”

Goneril is imperiously defiant. “Say if I *do*—the *laws* are *mine*, not thine!” Only she and her sister possess princely powers. “Who can arraign me for’t?”

Albany demands confession: “O most *monstrous*, know’st thou *this paper?*”

Goneril storms away. “Ask me not what I know!”

Albany tells a courtier, “Go after her; she’s *desperate!* Govern her!” The man bows and follows the furious lady.

“What you have charged me with, that have I *done*—and *more, much* more!” says Edmund, boastful in his malice. “The time will bring it out.

“’Tis past, and so am I.” He looks up at his unknown adversary. “But what art thou, that hast this fortune on me? If thou’rt *noble*,” he says—haughtily conveying doubt—“I do *forgive* thee.”

“Let’s *exchange* charity!” replies Edgar hotly. “I am no less in blood than *thou* art, Edmund—if *more*, the more thou hast *wrongèd* me!” He pulls off his helmet. “My name is *Edgar*—and *thy father’s son!*”

“The gods are *just*, and of our pleasant *vices* make instruments to *plague* us: the dark and vicious place where he got *thee* cost him his *eyes!*”

Edmund grimly seconds that. “Thou hast spoken right; ’tis *true*: the wheel is come full circle,” he mutters. His intense stare is sinister. “*I am here!*” He lies back—waiting.

Albany warmly greets the fugitive. “Methought thy very gait did prophesy a royal nobleness! I must embrace thee!” He does so, then stands back, hands at the young man’s shoulders. “Let sorrow *split my heart*, if ever *I* did hate thee or thy father!”

Edgar bows. “Worthy prince, I know’t.”

“Where have you hid yourself? How have you known the miseries of your father?”

“By *nursing* them, my lord. Listen to a brief tale—and when ’tis told, *oh*, that *my heart would burst!*”

“Escaping the bloody proclamation that followed me so near—oh, our lives’ *sweetness*, that we the pain of death would *hourly* die, rather than die at once!—taught me to shift into a *madman’s* rags—to assume a semblance that very *dogs* disdained!

“And in that guise met I my *father*, with his bleeding rings, their precious stones new-lost—became his *guide*, led him, begged for him, saved him from despair—never—*oh, a fault!*—*revealed* myself unto him until some half-hour past, when I was being armèd.”

Edgar pauses, his voice choked with emotion. “Not sure of, though *hoping* for, this good success, I asked his *blessing*, and told him, from first to last, my pilgrimage.

“But his flawed heart—*alack*, too weak to bear the conflict ’twixt two extremes of passion, *joy* and *grief*—*burst!*” He wipes his eyes. “Smilingly.”

Says Edmund, “This speech of yours hath *moved* me, and I shall—perchance—do good....

“But *speak you on*,” he urges; “you look as if you had something *more* to say.”

“If there be more *more woeful*, hold it in!” says Albany, “for *I* am almost ready to dissolve, hearing of this!”

Edgar nods gravely. “To such as love not *sorrow*, that would have seemed a period”—enough. “More yet, amplifying *much*, would make *too* much—and top extremity.

“Whilst I began in clamouring, there came a man who, having seen me in my *worst* estate,”—as a madman, “then shunned my abhorred society.

“But, finding who ’twas that so *endured*, with his strong arms he fastened on my neck, and *cried out* as if he’d *burst heaven!*—threw him down by my father—and told the most *piteous* tales of *Lear* and him that *ever ear received!*—in recounting which, his *grief* grew *puissant*, and the sinews of his *life* began to *crack!*”

“Then the *trumpets* sounded—*twice!*—and there I left him, trancèd.”

“But who was this?” asks Albany.

“*Kent*, sir—the banished *Kent!*—who, *in disguise*, followed his enemy king—and *did him service* improper for even a *slave!*”

But now a courtier runs to the duke—holding out a bloody knife. “*Help, help!*” he cries. “*Oh, help!*”

Edgar grasps his shoulder. “What kind of help?”

“*Speak*, man,” Albany tells him.

“What *means* that bloody *knife?*” asks Edgar.

The courtier stares down at the weapon. “’Tis hot, it steams!—it came even from the *heart* of—*Oh, she’s dead!*”

“*Who is dead?*” demands Albany. “*Speak*, man!”

“Your *lady*, sir, your *lady!*—and her *sister* by her is *poisoned!*—she hath *confessed it!*”

Edmund is nearing death; his cynical laughs costs him considerable pain. “I was contracted to them *both*. All *three* now *marry!*... in an instant.”

Edgar sees his father’s friend approach. “Here comes *Kent.*”

Albany has turned to his captain. “Produce their bodies, be they dead or *alive!*” he orders angrily. “This *judgment of the heavens*, that makes us *tremble*, touches us not with *pity!*”

Kent approaches the kingdom's new sovereign and bows.

"Is this *he*?" the duke asks Edgar. "The time will not allow the compliment which very manners urge!" he tells the earl apologetically.

Says Kent, sadly, wearily, "I am come to bid *my king* and *master* aye *good night*"—a final farewell. "Is he not here?"

"Great thing of us forgot!" cries Albany. "*Speak*, Edmund!—where's the *king*? And where's *Cordelia*?"

A wagon is wheeled forward. Says the duke solemnly, "See'st thou this object, Kent?"

The earl is stunned to see the bodies of Goneril and Regan. "*Alack!* Yet why *thus*?"

"*Edmund* was *belovèd!*" cries the wounded man. "The one the other poisoned—for *my* sake!—and after slew *herself!*" Thus would the knave damn Goneril as a suicide; but Regan, even as she was dying, took revenge.

For a moment, Albany stares at Edmund. Then the duke, long and often a victim of his wife's perfidy, takes his own revenge: "Even so." He motions to attendants. "Cover their faces."

Edmund knows he will soon die—and he craves a satisfaction. "I pant for life; some *good* I mean to do, despite of mine own nature," he claims, affecting remorse.

He lifts his head. "Quickly *send to the castle!* Nay, *send in time*, for my writ is on the *life of Lear!*—and of *Cordelia!*" he announces. "Be *brief* in it," he moans; he wants confirmation of his greatest crime.

"*Run, run,*" cries Albany, "*Oh, run!*" Men dash toward the gray edifice.

Edgar asks Edmund, "To *whom*, my lord?—who hath that office? Send thy token of *reprieve!*"

"Well thought on! Take my *sword!*—give it the *captain!*"

"*Haste thee as for thy life!*" calls Albany, as Edgar runs toward the castle—and its dungeon.

Edmund savors the duke's panicked consternation. "He hath commission from *thy wife* and me to *hang him* in the prison!—and to lay the *blame* upon Cordelia, for her despair at what *she did herself!*"

"The gods defend her!" cries the duke. With a brusque wave he banishes Edmund: "Bear him hence awhile."

Edmund is furious at being thus thwarted, but is too weak, now, to protest. Two army privates load him onto a canvas stretcher and haul him away, trailing blood from the pool in the dirt where he had lain.

## Chapter Fourteen Peace

**H**owl, howl, howl, howl!" wails Lear, as he staggers forward, tears streaming, before the nobles. In his arms he carries Cordelia.

"Oh, you are men of *stones!* Had I your eyes and *tongues*, I'd use them so that *heaven's vault* should crack! She's *gone forever!*"

He lowers her gently to the ground near the duke, and kneels beside her. "I know when one is dead, and when one lives," he sobs. "She's *dead as earth!*" Leaning over the limp form, he rocks back and forth in agony.

Lear looks at his youngest daughter's face—and a hope strikes him. "Lend me a looking-glass!" he pleads, to a courtier. "If that her breath will mist or stain the same, why then *she lives!*"

Kent, exhausted, can only stare, crushed. "Is this the promised *end?*"—apocalypse.

Edgar, returned and numb, murmurs, "Or *image* of that horror...."

"The *fall* and *cease,*" says the duke, appalled.

Lear, on hands and knees, reaches toward Cordelia's lips. "This feather *stirs!*—she *lives!* If it be *so,*" he says, "it is a chance which does *redeem* all sorrows that ever I have felt!"



Kent kneels beside his king. "O my good master—"  
 "Prithee, away." Lear hovers over Cordelia, studying the tiny white feather.  
 Edgar comes to him. "'Tis noble *Kent*, your friend...."  
 Lear, oblivious, leans back, hands clasped to his head. "A *plague* upon you," he sobs,  
 "murderers, traitors all! I might have *saved* her!—now *she's gone forever!*"  
 "Cordelia, Cordelia!" he calls, pathetically, "stay a *little!*"  
 He thinks he can hear her voice; he leans forward. "Eh? What is't thou say'st?" He wipes  
 tears from his face. "Her voice was ever soft, gentle and low; an excellent thing in woman," he  
 whispers.  
 He closes his eyes for a moment. "I *killed* the slave that was a-hanging thee."  
 The northern captain nods. "'Tis true, my lords, he did."  
 Cries Lear proudly, "Did I not, fellow? I have seen the *day*, biting with my good *falchion* I  
 would have *made them skip!*"—set enemies to flight. "He looks down sadly. "I am old now,  
 and these same crosses foil me."  
 He squints up at Kent. "Who are you? Mine eyes are not o' the best. I'll tell you straight...."  
 "If Fortune brag of two she *loved* and *hated*," Kent tells him, softly, "one of them ye behold."  
 Says Lear, wiping his swollen lids with a sleeve, "This is a dullèd eyesight. Are you not  
 Kent?"  
 "The *same*—Kent your *servant*; here is your servant *Caius*"—his disguised incarnation.  
 Lear smiles. "*He's* a good fellow, I can tell you that! He'll *strike*—and *quickly*, too!" The  
 smile fades. "He's dead and rotting."  
 "No, my good lord; *I* am that very man—"  
 "I'll see that straight," nods Lear, beginning to weep.  
 "—that from the first of your difference and decay have followed your sad steps!"  
 "You are welcome hither."  
 "Nor no man *else*," says Kent. He looks at the wagon. "All's *cheerless*, *dark*, and *deadly*.  
 Your eldest daughters have *fordone* themselves desperately, and are dead."  
 Lear, staring at Cordelia, merely nods. "Aye, so I think."  
 Albany is watching. "He knows not what he says; and vain it is that we present us to him."  
 Edgar concurs. "Very bootless."  
 The duke's captain comes to him to report: "Edmund is dead, my lord!" His final, painful  
 gasp was unheard by the indifferent soldiers with him; they have only recently noticed that their  
 charge was a corpse.  
 "That's but a trifle here," says the duke, turning away.  
 He raises his hands and addresses the court. "You lords and noble friends, know our intent!  
 "What *comfort* may come to this great decay shall be *applied*. As for us, we will, during the  
 life of this old majesty, resign to him our absolute power."  
 He nods to banished Kent and outlawed Edgar. "To you, your *rights*—with *boot*, and such  
 addition as your *honours* have more than merited!  
 "All friends shall taste the wages of their virtue, and all *foes* the cup of their deservings."  
 He looks tearfully at Lear, still crouched beside Cordelia. "Oh, see, *see!*"  
 Cries the old man, inconsolable, "And my poor fool is hanged!"  
 "No, no, no *life*....  
 "Why should a dog, a horse, a rat, have life, and *thou* no breath at all?"  
 "Thou'lt come no more." He begins again to rock back and forth. "Never, never, never,  
 never, never...."  
 He is still for a silent, agonized moment. He touches his throat. "Pray you, undo this button,"  
 he asks Kent. "Thank you, sir."  
 Lear leans closer to Cordelia. "Do you see *this?*" he cries to the others, holding the feather.  
 "Look on her!—look, her *lips!* Look *there*, look *there!*"

Slowly, his eyes close. The feather floats down, and is caught in one of his tears on her pale cheek.

“He faints!” cries Edgar. “My lord!—*my lord!*”

Kent drops to his knees, hands hanging down. “*Break, heart! I prithee, break!*”

Edgar touches Lear’s face. “Look up, my lord!”

Kent shakes his head. “Vex not his ghost. *Oh*, let him *pass!* He hates him much that would upon the rack of *this* tough world stretch him out longer....”

Edgar slowly pulls back his hand. “He is gone, indeed.”

“The wonder is that he hath endured so long,” says Kent. “He but usurped his life.”

Albany regards the dismal scene. “Bear them from hence,” he commands. “Our present business is *general woe!*”

“Friends of my soul,” he tells Kent and Edgar, “*you twain* rule in this realm, and the gorèd state sustain!”

Says Kent, “I have a *journey*, sir, shortly to go. My master calls me; I must not say no.”

Edgar rises. “The weight of this sad time we must obey—speak what we *feel*, not what we ought to say.

“The oldest hath borne most.

“We that are young shall never live so long—nor see so much.”