

AN EXCERPT FROM
THE TRAGEDY OF FENWIELL

by
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CHARACTERS

- ❖ Nædrid | *nee-drid* | A Welsh King
- ❖ Bilewhit | *bi-le-wit* | Oldest son of Nædrid
- ❖ Fenwiell | *fen-weel* | Middle son of Nædrid
- ❖ Nædridmil | *nee-drid-mil* | Youngest son of Nædrid
- ❖ Treópia | *tree-o-peo-u* | Deceased queen and wife of Nædrid
- ❖ Lufia | *loo-fee-u* | Daughter of Nædrid, youngest sibling
- ❖ Tohýthia | *toe-hi-thee-u* | Adopted daughter of Gramfier
- ❖ Léon | *lee-on* | Merchant
- ❖ Forlégia | *for-le-gee-u* | Daughter of Leon
- ❖ Gramfier | *gram-feer* | Brother of Treópia, an English King
- ❖ Bodga | *bod-guh* | Gramfier's Diplomat
- ❖ Belgast | *bel-gast* | Blacksmith
- ❖ Slawlic | *slo-lie* | Shepherd
- ❖ Doglip | *dog-lip* | Shepherd
- ❖ Cildisc | *kil-disk* | Shepherd

ACT I
SCENE 1

At the Blacksmith's forge. Belgast, the smithy, working at his anvil. Enter Slawlic, the shepherd.

Slawlic:

Belgast's hammer rings clear!

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Belgast:

A clammer to drive away the evening birds.

Slawlic:

Do these depart? Then count
their song a clammer, drones
unfit to join the tool
that beats the fire to form!
But no, methinks me hear
them now! They rise to join
in Belgast's choir!

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Belgast:

You are
a force of flattery, Slawlic,
but a slave of simplicity.
Bells, not birds, do you hear.

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Slawlic:

Bells for birds?

Belgast:

Bells for Vespers.

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Slawlic:

What tidings! Slack have swayed
the ropes for seven days
by three.

Belgast:

As all good folk in
stillness wait 'til mourning pass the grave-wake.
Dear Treópia! Her laughter now our
bane, lament of lands e'er blooming! In
honor hung my hammer here, these mournful
mornings, flaming forge a barren womb. But
now do bells and hammers ring!
Life, its cadence, quirk of spirit, all must

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form a fleeting ‘tempt at habit, else we
all be chained to grief that leads to dying.

Slawlic:

I come from hills and grazing
where hills are still and grass
is solemn. Moon and cloud
contend for day with fog.
The queen is dead three weeks. 30
The heav’ns did dim a star!
But stars may fall to bring
the night to needed close.
Treópia was queen of queens!
A star in the belly of a mountain,
where clung we bats and clumps
of coal in caverns. Days 35
we mark in wake of her sleep.
Without her, see how low
we grope in day as night!

Belgast:

Drown your grief in glad bells, flattering shepherd!
Though I shall join this encomium. 45
True she was, and good to every word. So
grieve, my heart, how illness entangles our dearest
friends and strangles *[them in]* their sweetest songs.

Slawlic:

Aye, faithful she was. How unlike her brother, methinks.

Belgast:

I do not pretend to comprehend the character of men 50
with whom I have not supped, and least so those I have.

Slawlic:

He plots our king’s demise!

Belgast:

He marches, that is sure, as our
lady’s tree stoops in the courtyard.

Slawlic:

Just that? Ah!
You know the forge’s fumes!
Make music with your hammer.
Leave the world as it seems! 55

I too have seen the bending tree.
It hunches with no sickly
twist, it sheds its leaves
and leaves no rot, as though
it burned without burning.
Perhaps it grieves for her four unwed children. 60

Belgast:
Bilewhit – the eldest – a sturdy laugher.
If truth were gold, he'd beggar lords. 65

Slawlic:
A goodly sort. Too good, I fear,
to see the knife behind the smile.

Belgast:
Nædridmil – the silver tongue.
A twisting moss upon the oak.
He sees the form behind the silk. 70

Slawlic:
A serpent sees as much.
His heart is coiled.
I have watched him watch.

Belgast:
Lufia – the youngest – light of court!
Too kind to bear a crown, but ever bright. 75

Slawlic:
Her meekness I would trail
before a steel-clad king.

Belgast:
And Fenwiell –

Slawlic:
A spirit wilted in wine!
Noble head low hung with crown.
He hides in cups. 80

Belgast:
Reprove your tongue, shepherd.

Slawlic:
Tongue follows lip. Shall I kiss the royal –

Belgast:
Reprove, sir!

85

Slawlic:
Aye! Persecute the preacher! It is the truth.

Belgast:
Some truths tell lies.

Slawlic:
See how you burn without burning!

Belgast:
Your words reveal secrets and remark wounds.
Cover the sin of a king, says the Preacher. 90

Slawlic:
He is no king.

Belgast:
He is a king in winterhold.

Slawlic:
Oh, go on clamoring! I am off to the field.

Belgast:
Your flock a better audience shall make.

Slawlic:
Nay! These flee when Slawlic talks,
But you are a bosom friend! 96

(Exit Slawlic. Scene.)

SCENE 2

Evening in the king's court. Bilewhit, Fenwiell, Nædridmil, Lufia, Léon the merchant, Forlegia, and Bodga (cupbearer) await the arrival of King Nædrid.

Bilewhit:

What hour is this? Do trumpets retire?

Fenwiell:

Peace, brother, your dust does stir the breath –
your breath does stir the dust.

Lufia:

The king comes!

Bilewhit:

Ah! From where have you come, sister?
I am startled – and Fenwiell, accomplice!

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Fenwiell:

She hid with ease behind your shoulders as in a cleft!

Lufia:

The criers chant in evening streets,
“No more in sack be found, tonight
the prodigal world returns home!”
Aye! And in the wake of merry-make
shall we walk this night in the gardens?

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Bilewhit:

By and by, but on the morrow.

Fenwiell:

You are occupied?

Bilewhit:

You shall see, by and by!

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(Bilewhit walks across the room.)

Lufia: (to Fenwiell)

Sir, glad cloth cannot veil the soul.

Fenwiell:

You sister me, riddle –
Riddle me, sister!

Lufia:

I?

Fenwiell:

Do not I seem confused?

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Lufia:

Aye, O dearest heart most glad with guesses
where wisdom would your hand by truth lead!
Temperance be the companion of festivity.

Fenwiell:

Riddles! *(glancing behind)*

But harken to me, sister.

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Two watched have I moons – two moons have I –

Lufia:

How I love you, brother! In your need, you guard me!

Fenwiell:

Listen, I beg you! I watch a man –

Léon: *(walking up)*

Your majesties, a cheery air has filled mine
stalls! The trade shall double this new moon.

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Forlegia:

For we poor merchants are rich in your grace.
Does not the king's smile fatten fields?

Fenwiell:

Your flatter does speech –
your speech does flatter

Lufia:

And flattery sung with grace foretells...

35

Léon: *(aside to Fenwiell)*

Noble prince, choice bottles rest below
in casks of birch and iv'ry, stowed
as you besought – the cellar key!

(hands Fenwiell a key)

(Trumpets. Enter Naedrid)

Bodga:

Lo! The king!

Nædrid:

Let none be clothed this night in sorrow. 40
The wheel has turned – no more the bite of death.
A silver dawn breaks.
We e'er shall bend our hearts before
the noble queen. Yet does it suite her beauty,
her smile, her grace, that we should wither? 45
Beside you, fellow, your tears have formed streams
in the dust. Wash your face in them and be whole.
Rise! Rise, my kingdom! Up!
Now dine and dance! Now live you gods
in mirth beneath mine hand. For greener
days shall grow from these burnéd bulwarks! 50

(*Trumpets*)

Bodga: (*aside, departing unnoticed*)

And from these gods, O night, conceal my leave...

Bilewhit:

Hail, king!

All:

Hail!

Léon:

Fortune crown him ever-light! 55

Nædridmil: (*aside*)

While serpent coils beneath the bush...

Nædrid:

Hark friends! The banquet hall is longsuffering,
But we abuse her patience. Let song and supping
lead where grief dare not tread.

(*All exit joyful, save Nædridmil.*)

Nædridmil:

O 'cestral tree that binds my love, a brother's
watch I keep! Yet gaze mine eyes beyond –
fair Lufia! Wicked luck has made us kin. 60

Shame has stayed mine soul, but now our mother sleeps.
If love be crime, then jails cathedrals. I wear
the mask and wait the hour to burn and bloom.

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(Exit. Scene.)

SCENE 3
In pastures. Doglip and Cildisc recline and whittle.

Doglip:

Would that sheep dance or wax the poet.
I will milk adders to escape the bleating!

Cildisc:

They eat, sleep, stink, and all again.
A shepherd's life is wool and wind!

Doglip:

Today I dreamt a knight
at court. A golden cup,
a goose, a lady's kiss –
I wake to find a lamb
has soiled my boot!

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Cildisc:

These hills do madness breed!

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(Enter Slawlic)

Slawlic:

Peace, peace, you vagrant sages.
Does idleness philosophers make?

Doglip:

Sloth makes sheep of men, and sheep of sheep.

Cildisc:

What news beyond the ridge?

Has aught occurred to chide
our boredom?

15

Slawlic:

Bells do peal
and heaven breaks the fast
of angels. Regal skies
hold pinkish hue. The king
has passed from mourning. So!
We too shall turn ourselves
and play at games to break
the tick of tedium.

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Doglip:

What game? Shall we race goats?
Pluck thistles for crowns?

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Cildisc:

Shall we cast lots and wager
whose ewe first drops its dung?

Slawlic:

Nay, fellow fieldlings.
Let each man be a king!
With crook in hand, we crown
the one who strikes a stone
from yonder stump the fairest way.

30

Doglip:

A test of aim? No need –
I win! For none in all
the vale may cast as I.

35

Cildisc:

Indeed, Bartimaeus!
Methinks you could not hit
the stream when from the raft
you slipt!

Slawlic:

Away, away!
We'll drive our flocks to brook
anon, and play beneath
the willow-shade. The sheep
have grass, the men shall play.

40

Doglip:

I go, I go – though if
I strike the mark, you call
me David, slinger true!

45

Cildisc:

E'en David's shadow kissed dust!

(Exit all.)

(Enter Fenwiell, with plain garb and flask.)

Fenwiell:

Luna, Luna... look you down
at me, muse of mirk, winter-wife.
I drink your dew like dust in a serpent's mouth. 50

Were I chalk, the rain might dissolve me.
Were I mist, the wind might scatter me.
Yet I am dirt, naught else. A blackguard of
blessings, roguish and recreant,
derelict and ill-begotten. 55

Oh, to un-thread the twine that tuned
my worm-soul in the womb! Where is one
reborn? By what baptism might a man
hone himself, whose heart was hewn
in hallowed halls, from holy fire, only
to have his head hunted by hell?
And for good cause, he owns. Aye. 60

Fickle man that I am! I make my
morning vow and drown the oath by noontide.
This flask – lover, leech, liquid tomb –
makes jest of all my better parts.
King-born, beggar-fallen.
See how shame has shingled mine house,
these amber eyes but panes to an unfurnished soul. 65

Yet wine – this bastard, blessed balm –
soothes me sweet. I sip, for I see no
crowns in cups. 70

(examines key in hand)

All crowns be thornéd.
I sip where I see no scepter, nor my mother's
eyes. Cups are the province of the living,
but dreams are the dance of all, and how she
weeps in mine! No cure have I
save that I cease to see, to breathe,
to know, to need. I nail these hands
upon bloody beams, while Barabbas dines –
that a fitting hour would be! 75
A goat led to slaughter. Swine beneath the knife.
In cups I vanish, and in vanishing, rest. 80

(Takes a long draught.)

The sheep at least know not such guilt.
Would I were wool and walked without name.

84

(Exit. Scene.)

SCENE 4
In the castle. Naedrid pacing.

Naedrid:

Who lets in the night
by an open pane?
Which servant must I
brand? But see the moon,
low with witch branches
gleaming, pale tendrils
of an ashen pool
flowing down to earth.
How often have I
drunk deep the moonlight
only to thirst for sun!
I would give my eyes
to smell spring raindrops
on the stone bulwarks.
I would give my ears
to see the daylight
fill a cathedral
at mattins. I, king,
would give my right hand
to hear the footsteps
of innocence and love
racing to my chest.
But I, drunk moon,
am drowned in the lust
of the flesh. My halls
entomb my spirit,
for neither do I
hope for redemption
nor do I seek it,
but I, like a bale
of burning cotton,
die in fits of flame.

(Enter Lufia.)

Lufia:

Good night, sire. Dress in hue does suite your countenance!

Naedrid:

The wind did howl today,
Shutters clacking upon stone –

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(Aside)
Or 'twas my chest?

Lufia:
I heard it too. I thought you call'd my name.
Wouldst speak a while?

Nædrid:
No need – go back to playing laces.
I've little use for speech without cause.

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Lufia:
No cause, my lord – only myself.

(Aside)
He holds me like the wind,
And I, him as a kite keeps the breeze:
Only noticed when intruding.

(Enter Nædridmil and Léon.)

Léon:
Your Grace!

45

Nædrid:
Rise, merchant. What word from the south?

Léon:
Gramfier marches. His banners flood the vale.

Nædrid:
Of course.

Léon:
But your banners hold, good sire,
and steel the hearts of your subjects.

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Nædrid:
We'll speak anon.

(They confer aside. Nædridmil turns to Lufia.)

Nædridmil:
Sweet sister – a joy to see you, blooming where all wilts!

Lufia:

What jests, Naedridmael.

Nædridmil:

No jest, my dove. I speak as flame to candle.
I see you, as the moon kisses the sea,
and in your gaze I drown most willingly.

55

Lufia:

You speak riddles! Still, a kind word clumsily bestowed
may be received for eloquence, for sore I pine for kindness.

Nædridmil: (aside)

She understands not. Innocence defends.
But soon, sweet one, you shall be mine.

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Léon: (to Nædrid)

Then let us draw the border firm and fierce.
My silver, your arms.

Nædridmil: (to Lufia)

Wilt walk, fair dove?

Lufia:

A moment hence. I breathe before I move.

(Nædrid and Léon exit. Nædridmil lingers, watching Lufia.)

Nædridmil:

Let kings wage war – I wage a sweeter sin.

65

(He exits. Scene.)