

ACT ONE SCENE TWO

LIGHTS UP TO REVEAL AN OLD WOMAN COLLECTING FIREWOOD. AS SHE DOES SO SHE SINGS A BARELY DISCERNIBLE FOLK SONG. THE MAID ENTERS AND WATCHES THE WOMAN A WHILE BEFORE SPEAKING.

DOCHA

Good evening.

THE OLD WOMAN CONTINUES COLLECTING FIREWOOD BUT DOESN'T REPLY. DOCHA IS ABOUT TO EXIT WHEN THE WOMAN SPEAKS.

OLD WOMAN

Those are fancy clothes for these parts.

DOCHA

Just some old things to travel in.

OLD WOMAN

Really. You're not from round here then?

DOCHA

No. We're travellers.

OLD WOMAN

People round here don't take kindly to strangers; been far to many of late.

DOCHA

We're not looking to stay, just passing through.

OLD WOMAN

Where to?

DOCHA

Dreipentz.

OLD WOMAN

That's a long journey.

DOCHA

Yes. Many miles.

OLD WOMAN

You say 'we', you're not alone then.

DOCHA

No. There are four of us, myself and three companions.

OLD WOMAN

Companions? That's a word you won't hear much around here.

DOCHA

We're just looking for somewhere to stay the night.

OLD WOMAN

Like I said...

DOCHA

It would only be for one night.

OLD WOMAN

And these companions?

DOCHA

My friend and her two children.

OLD WOMAN

So no men?

DOCHA

No.

OLD WOMAN

These are dangerous times to be travelling; especially with two children and no man to protect you.

DOCHA

We've been careful.

OLD WOMAN

And on your way to Dreipentz, you say.

DOCHA

Yes.

OLD WOMAN

Your purpose?

DOCHA

My friend's visiting her parents. They are elderly and have never seen their grandchildren.

OLD WOMAN

The elderly should always have the chance to see their grandchildren. And her husband?

DOCHA

You know how it is... Business.

OLD WOMAN

Oh I know how it is with men and business.

DOCHA

You wouldn't happen to know of somewhere where we might sleep safely tonight?

OLD WOMAN

I might... You'd pay?

DOCHA

Of course, we're not looking for charity.

OLD WOMAN

So you have money then?

DOCHA

A little; enough to get by on.

OLD WOMAN

You're wise to think about a place to rest tonight; this is a dangerous land. This road is often a silent witness to robberies and worse; bandits and slave-traders are everywhere.

DOCHA

You have a place in mind?

OLD WOMAN

There are people I know could help you.

DOCHA

If you could take me to them I would be most grateful.

OLD WOMAN

Your friend, where is she?

DOCHA

I came on ahead, she's following with her children.

OLD WOMAN

You wait here for your friend. I'll go make the arrangements, meet you back here before night fall.

DOCHA

Thank you.

OLD WOMAN

Make sure you're here, mind. And I'll expect something for my trouble.

DOCHA

Of course. Thank you.

THE OLD WOMAN LEAVES. DOCHA TAKES HER PACK FROM HER BACK AND SETTLES DOWN ON THE GROUND. SHE TAKES A CRUST OF BREAD FROM HER PACK AND BEGINS TO EAT. AS SHE DOES SO HENDEL AND THE CHILDREN ENTER.

PRETA

Is it much further, Mother?

HENDEL

No look, see, it's Docha.

DOCHA STANDS AND BOWS AS HENDEL AND THE CHILDREN APPROACH

DOCHA

Madam.

HENDEL

Docha, there's no need to get up. You must be as tired as we are. Did you have any luck?

DOCHA

I met a woman, here by the side of the road; she thinks she knows someone who will give us shelter for the night.

HENDEL

You've done well. Children, take off your packs and rest. Docha's found us a place to stay.

HENDEL CROSSES TO DOCHA

DOCHA

So, what's the plan?

DOCHA

She'll meet us here when she's made arrangements.

HENDEL

And if she doesn't return?

DOCHA

I'm sure she will; I said we had money.

HENDEL

I hope you didn't give her the impression we're rich. What little I managed to take from the house has to last us all the way to Dreipentz.

DOCHA

She was just an old woman collecting firewood; all she's expecting is a few coins.

HENDEL

I hope so, because that's all we can spare. And she asked no questions?

DOCHA

Other than the reason for our journey, no. I explained you were taking the children to see their grandparents.

HENDEL

That's true enough. But we must be careful; the least said the better must be our watchword. There are many who saw Kerna and his ideas as dangerous; people who would delight in punishing him still further by causing us harm.

DOCHA

I promise madam, I've not said or done anything to draw attention to you.

HENDEL

I'm sure, but you'll understand that events these past few days have made me more vigilant.

DOCHA

Madam, you don't owe me an explanation.

HENDEL

But I think I do, Docha. When I married Kerna sixteen years ago he was a junior officer in the service of the Governor of Gumjah province. Everyone said, what a bright future he had. How one day they thought he might even be elected to the High Council itself. So when he was made Governor of Ajunah I began to think it might all be true. But then one day, on his return from a tour of inspection, he began to talk about the things he'd witnessed; the disease and poverty in the prohta settlements, the stench and filth of their existence. And from that day on he was determined to change things. He outlawed the use of the prod, he increased the food ration, provided them with medicines and recycled material for clothing and bedding. And in return the earthers worked for him, worked like they'd never worked before. They loved him, Docha. For two consecutive years Ajunah exceeded the production targets set down by the High Council; it meant he was then able to argue for this 'new treatment' in the Senate. But all this brought him enemies. Those who control the market for seed are rich and powerful men, Docha. Greater productivity means the more efficient use of seed, and less seed means less money for the 'greedy' and the 'grasping'. There were many who hated him and there are many who will be cheering his removal from office tonight, and those same men will be happier still if we are all destroyed. His concern for the prohta has cost my family everything.

DOCHA

I know madam.

HENDEL

When did it become a crime to be loved?

*ENTER THE OLD WOMAN WITH JERZY, A
SLAVER*

DOCHA

Look madam, the old woman has returned.