

# Kenning Magic



Lizzie Ross

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KENNING MAGIC

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# CHAPTER ONE



## I

In the Season of Dry Heat, in the village of Windrow, Noni knelt inside her hut, mopping up spilled milk. Noni didn't work in the fields, where watching others effortlessly plant and sow crops only reminded her of how different she was from everyone else. Bad enough that the leaves sliced at her skin and the dust and seeds made her sneeze, but worse was the reminder of what she could never do. She was much happier staying in her hut, caring for infants too young to know she was unlike them.

Noni sat back on her heels and stared around her one room. This hut, its furnishings and a book were all Oma had left her. A rough-oak table, a three-legged stool, baskets, a cupboard and some shelves faced her stone hearth. A pot and long spoon dangled from nails above it. The dirt floor was packed hard, swept clean by her willow-twig broom. A narrow pegged ladder led to a low-ceilinged sleeping loft, below a thick layer of thatch. No windows eased the plain surface of the daubed walls, but the open door let in a breeze that smelled of fresh earth.

A path started at her door, forking left and right as it entered a stand of oak. Above the woods, if the air was clear, she could see distant rosy mountains, marking the border between Mitlery and the dragons.

Noni's mind walked down the path to the fork. In her imagination, she glanced left to Windrow's Market Square, but chose the right fork and flew away from the mountains, past Windrow's fields to King's Port and the Zilfur Zee; then back again to the mountains and the 'Dragon Hold'.

'Dragon Hold' and Zilfur Zee, the words made her fingers tingle. Oma's stories about them promised danger and thrills to anyone who 'Traveled' so far. But 'Traveling' required Magic. With a sigh, Noni gathered her long dark hair into a knot. She was stuck to the ground as surely as this hut.

The breeze cooled the back of her neck. Although she gazed at the oaks, she was imagining ocean and dragons, with herself casting spells to tame each. No more hard work of lifting, bending or stretching to do the slightest thing. Instead, she would flick her fingers to harvest turnips and cabbages, to put supper on the table, to make dragons obey and oceans settle. She could be such a wise Mage, if only ....

A sharp squeak drew her eyes to a pair of cradles, where two babies stirred. Strewn between her and the cradles were smidgens of bread, a ball of wool, several acorn caps and an oak leaf dried to a lacy outline.

"You can't possibly be hungry so soon," she scolded Old Winesap's grandniece, Aster, who squeaked again. "I just fed you that porridge. Now sit quietly while I take care of Betula." In her care, this morning, were these two, the strongest babies in the village; able



to 'Reach' for toys, food, animals and even other children from an early age. To protect them, their cradles had been covered with 'Wards' soon after their births.

Aster's 'Ward' was made of delicate stems harvested under the Waking Moon and woven into willow leaf and cloud patterns. Betula's was simpler, grass and fern fronds laced through a frame of branches. Noni preferred Betula's sturdier 'Ward', for she always worried a leaf or cloud might snap off Aster's. Aster's short-tempered mother would hold back barterings if anything like that happened.

Aster raised her arm, floating a piece of bread from the floor towards her basket, where it hit the 'Ward' and fell. The child screeched in frustration and 'Reached' again for the bit of bread. It bounced up and down several times between floor and 'ward' before finally disintegrating into crumbs, too small to be Magicked by anyone without a strong spell.

"Oh, there you've done it, you wasteful child. That's for the piglets, now," Noni chided. "You must learn not to 'Reach' for everything you want." Aster looked ready to cry, but a crash and a long, skinny body falling through the doorway made the child's eyes and mouth open wide.

It was Twig, in another growing spurt that confused his feet and mind. Neither seemed able to keep up with what the other was planning. Noni noticed brown and green stains covering the front of his jersey. In his sand-colored hair, shorn just below his earlobes, two leaves stuck out, making him resemble a tufted owl. His leggings were patched at each knee and his bare feet showed scratches near his ankles. He frowned slightly as he picked at a clump of dried moss on his sleeve.

"If someone would just teach me a 'Scouring' Spell or two," he moaned, "I could fall all over the place and not worry."

"You do that already," Noni joked. "Here." She handed him a rag and he scrubbed off what he could. But instead of placing the rag into her waiting hand, he released it into the room. Like a swallow soaring on a breeze, it gracefully sailed onto its hook next to the fruit baskets.

"You're just showing off," Noni said, her voice tight and thin. "When did you master that spell?"

Twig grinned, revealing a gap where his front teeth didn't meet. "This morning, first thing, I've been practicing the 'Reverse-Reach' all week. Want to see it again?"

"Not really." Noni turned back to her tasks. Twig was her best friend, but she couldn't help wishing for the Magic he so easily controlled. All these seasons she'd watched him growing more and more skilled with spells, while she could brag of nothing but growing a little bit taller.

There was one thing she could do, but she'd never mentioned it to Twig. Noni could read. Oma, her mother, called it 'kenning', and sometimes the 'Old Knowing'. Noni had never heard anyone but Oma mention it, so she never spoke of it after Oma died. She worried others knowing about it would be the final thing separating her from the rest of the village. They would stop bringing their children to her. They might think her a witch.

She was lucky that mothers trusted her with their infants. Without that, she'd have to beg for food. There was no other work she could do, for every other task in the village could be done with Magic. No one needed an extra hand and she would never be able to cast even the simplest of spells. Before dying, Oma had made that clear.

She could remember the days when she imitated what other children did. Oma watched with thin lips, but never discouraged her. Noni would gesture towards a spoon or jump from the ladder's lower rung, closing her eyes and hoping, "This time, it'll work. This time I'll cast the spell." She was eight before she stopped crying at each failure, ten before she stopped trying in front of others.

Still not looking at Twig, Noni folded rags to use on the children's bottoms as she struggled with her feelings. As lightly as possible, she asked, "Where are Linden and Laure? Don't they usually follow you like your shadow?" She forced a smile when she faced him.

"I don't know." Twig was twiddling his fingers to make the larger pieces of bread near Aster's cradle do cartwheels around each other. "They're probably off with Ma, practicing some cooking or sewing Spells or something. You know, girly stuff." The breadcrumbs moved in the Weaver Dance pattern, level with Twig's shoulders. "The girls are getting pretty good at it. Won't be long, now, before they ...." He broke off after glancing at Noni. His hands stilled and the crumbs fell to the floor.

Noni glared at him, one tight fist at her waist and the other pointing a long finger at his chin. "You. Are still. Showing. Off." The words came out softly but clearly and her pointing finger wagged to underline each of them.

Twig's eyes crossed as he focused on her fingertip.

"Sixteen years old and still thinking about games. If you can't be useful here," Noni continued, "without using Magic, then go away." She turned back to her stack of rags and only heard Twig leave when he tripped again at the doorsill. "He'll be impossible when he masters the 'Traveling' Spell," she said out loud, almost hoping Twig would hear her. "No one'll ever hear him coming or going."

A moment later, she regretted her quick temper and hard words. *Magic was all Twig had. Because he has no affinity for bees, he could never hope to take over his mother's hives. Any work with them always leaves him covered in welts. And, after all, it isn't his fault I have no Magic skills.*

But whose fault was it? Noni shuddered, trying again to free herself from the feelings that made her want to cry each time Twig learned a new Spell. Oma said kenning was her family's birthright, passed from mother to daughter since that first Mage, Winter, had given kenning to Candleberry. If anyone was to blame, it was Winter. He gave everyone else Magic, but only kenning to Candleberry. Why? Magic was so obviously the more valuable skill.

Noni slammed a rag onto her table. For a moment she closed her eyes, fighting tears. When she was younger, Oma would patiently explain why kenning was better than Magic, but Oma's reassurances could never erase her envy. Being able to ken and having Oma's book did not fill the space in her chest that widened when others cast spells. Noni would

happily trade kenning for the tiniest skill in Magic, to never feel the stares of everyone in Windrow. She knew they looked down on her. She knew they thought her family had done something terrible long ago.

She took a deep breath and concentrated on the rag in front of her. Then, with eyes closed, she raised her right hand and chanted the Spell Twig had taught her long ago.

*Oh come to me*

*This thing I want*

*I raise my hand*

*To call you nigh*

She repeated it, and then again, but felt no soft brush of cloth against her fingers. Through barely opened eyes, she peeked at the cloth. It hadn't stirred.

With tight lips, Noni faced the infants. Toys, food and pottery were spread across the floor. Why could *they* cast 'Reaching' Spells before they could even speak? She sighed as she bent to pick everything up. She truly loved the babies, but .... She didn't let the thought continue.

Later, as Betula and Aster slept, Noni sat in her doorway to watch the wind blow up dust from the path. In a patch of sun sat a barn-cat, flexing its paws. Sharp claws flashed and then disappeared. Noni wondered if dragons' claws worked the same way.

She thought of Twig and his growing Magical skills and felt admiration and jealousy battling each other in her heart. As she had done so often before, she swore to waste no more breath yearning for something she could never have. As Oma used to say, *a wish and a wagon will take you to King's Port.*

Old Winesap, one of the village elders, wandered by, muttering. His crooked cane-stick clicked against pebbles. Noni knew he could save his feet by 'Traveling', but he seemed to enjoy the sound of his cane-stick on the path. She was grateful that at least this one person didn't zing by through the air, 'Traveling' as if already late for dinner.

The old man stopped to stare at Noni. His gray eyes peered past his shambled hair and beard to study her face for a moment. Noni tried to smile. Then he moved on, scratching the top of his head with one hand as the other held the cane-stick, almost like a weapon. He seemed to attack the path with it.

Two dames passed, gossiping about King Zollan's new queen. Just three days earlier, the announcement of his second marriage had come by messenger, a young woman dressed in blue and gold. Children had gathered around the woman, like baby chicks around a mother hen. The messenger opened a box from which a clockwork pigeon leapt to squawk the words, "King Zollan XVIII takes pleasure in informing you that his new queen, Mirana, wishes joy to all." The dames passing Noni's hut hissed about Mirana's wedding gown, which reportedly had come from Sarony. "Everyone knows that Saronian weavers use only the cheapest and flimsiest of materials," said one of the dames. "Our worst enemies. What kind of king would allow his queen to ...?"



The woman's voice faded. Noni leaned her head against the doorframe and closed her eyes. The infants would sleep until late afternoon. All Windrow's workers rested at this time of day, so no scythes whooshed through the grain stalks and no oven doors or pottery clattered in dwellings. It was quiet, just a few bird chirrups rising from the oak that shaded her from the warm sun. A fly whisked past her ear.

Noni gently felt the square object in her pocket, the book of stories Oma had written down before Noni's birth. Oma always said this book was to be her solace when she envied others' Magic. She caressed the cover, remembering days of sitting with Oma and learning the 'Old Knowing' from it. It was stained from handling and the edges had begun to fray. Noni had read the book so often that she could recite each story from memory, but she had promised her mother she would never recite, only ken. But without Oma, it was hard for Noni to find comfort in her kenning.

It was two years since Oma died and her mother's last days were still vivid in Noni's memory. *"The 'Old Knowing' is precious, my girl," Oma had gasped one evening, lying on the mattress in the loft. "You mustn't lose it." The wasting fever that would soon kill her had taken her breath and strength and she strained at each word. "Our people were never Mages, not my grandmother, not my mother, not I. Not you, my daughter. But we always had the 'Knowing' and you have it, too." Oma closed her eyes, as if to concentrate on pulling air into weakened lungs. "You can capture the letters. Everyone else has forgotten you have it," she whispered, "but they'll remember, when they need you."*

Before dying, Oma reminded Noni of another book, the most important one in the kingdom of Mitlery. "One day, you might ken that book, little Noni, like Candleberry does in my story. My stories will help you find it." She winced, held her breath against the pain and said no more. After sun-fall, while a Blood Moon wrestled with the branches of a leafless tree, Oma died as Noni slept next to her.

The memory of waking to find her lifeless mother made Noni clutch the book in her pocket. She closed her eyes again to concentrate and saw herself two years earlier, sorting through cupboards and baskets. She couldn't have said what she was looking for, but she searched through everything again and again, until Twig's mother took her away. For many days, Noni huddled next to Twig's hearth, Oma's book always with her. When she returned to her lonely hut, she hid it in a crevice near her door, the reminder of her mother too sharp and painful. But soon, she had pulled it out, to ken her mother's stories again, to keep her promise to Oma.

Although she was only twelve when her mother had died, Noni stayed on alone in the hut. Her mother had tended the village children in exchange for food and cloth; Noni hoped to do the same. When a dame brought an infant for Noni, she agreed to watch it and soon there were other babies, as well.

By now, the little book of stories was a comfortable weight in her pocket, a happy reminder of Oma, whose voice seemed to echo behind each word. She could touch its cover and still hear her mother kenning, "In the long ago, before Magic came to Mitlery...."

“Noni,” Old Winesap’s nephew-wife stood on the path, tapping her leather-shod foot. She held a small bunch of vegetables and her narrow frame stood upright, as stiff and unbending as an old tree.

Noni eyed the limp greens. But she forced a smile. “Yes, Dame. I hope you have not been waiting.” Noni quickly stood and brushed her shift over her knees. Dame Willowdale always made her feel dirty.

“I’ve come for Aster,” announced the Dame, as though Noni were too stupid to know this. Noni had already gone inside for the baby, who was asleep and made no protest when lifted. When she took the vegetables, Noni tried not to scrunch her nose against the sour smell of greens too wilted for the Dame’s table.

“Someone will bring Aster after Moon Time,” Dame Willowdale said brusquely, taking the child from Noni. Although still asleep in the Dame’s firm grip, Aster’s arms waved as though she were batting at humblebees.

Noni watched the Dame stomp off towards her immaculate three-roomed house, its door carved with elaborate willow leaves of all varieties. Looking again at the greens in her hand, Noni envied the scullery at the Willowdale hearth, most likely stirring fresh onion tops, potatoes and some lamb into a pot of fragrant broth. She would willingly spend a day stirring that pot, in exchange for some of the stew. But for now, Noni would have to harvest some ferns in the copse. Cooked with her turnips and some thyme, it was a meal that would keep her from starving. With a grimace, she set the limp greens around her herbs, to keep the slugs away.

When Betula’s sister came for her, the baby lay quietly in her cradle, chewing her toes. In exchange for tending this child, Noni received a loaf of bread and a lump of sheep’s cheese. She could smell the toasted oats and barley in the steam that rose from the bread.

“My own Lucky Moon day.” she almost sang, grateful that Dame Ivy had remembered the Holiday. Noni danced into her hut, the bread and cheese held high. She placed her food in a basket and covered it, chanting ‘*Lucky Moon Day*’ softly to herself.

Though they were sometimes days of hunger for her, Noni loved the Moon Time celebrations. This Moon Time, in honor of the Weavers Moon, was dedicated to flax weavers, whose celebrations often got noisy. The weavers liked to display their skills, ‘Ascending’ their looms above the flax fields whose blue flowers matched the color of all cloth woven during that month. The clacking of the treadles above everyone’s head made some villagers nervous. But no loom ever fell or failed to produce beautiful cloth, not even if its weaver had stepped into the tavern to hoist a draught of foaming barley ale. She had never missed a Weaver’s Moon festival; after her meal, she would go, even without Twig.

Noni hid Oma’s book in her loft. Whether Holiday or Moon Time, it was safest to have empty pockets; too often, a young prankster had ‘Ascended’ and ‘Descended’ her and, later, she would find the smidgen in her pocket gone, her hard-earned meal wasted, forcing her to forage. Yet she didn’t mind these Moon Time jokes and even looked forward to being ‘Ascended’. Unless she climbed a tree or into her loft, it was the only chance her feet had to leave the ground.

When she came down from the loft and looked out her doorway, Twig was facing her on the path. She hadn't expected to see him again.

"Your babies have all gone home, now, eh?" he asked. He was nervously working a rope that floated in front of him, controlling the ends with his index fingers.

Noni could see he was attempting a Saron's Hat knot but with little success. It began to look like a jumble of writhing snakes. Twig seemed to give up and the rope straightened, coiled itself neatly and slipped into his pocket.

"Still no twins?" Noni asked. She'd rarely seen Twig without his two younger sisters framing him.

"No. They're busy yet, I suppose. 'Um,'" Twig paused to pull something out of his pocket. "Ma gave me a pasty for supper. Do you want some?" He brushed some lint off the browned and flaking pastry.

Noni thought he was apologizing for showing off earlier, so she smiled a return apology for her cutting remark. She knew words weren't needed between them. "Yes, I can smell it from here." Still smiling, she stepped through her doorway, "Mutton?"

"And turnips." Twig carefully broke the meat-filled pastry into two pieces and offered the larger half to Noni, but he made no protest when she took the smaller one. They sat under the oak and ate quietly, their eyes watching the sky above the flax field.

"Is that ...?" Twig asked suddenly, craning his neck to look towards the fields, above which a flock of pigeons swarmed up and then towards the Market Square. "No, I thought it might be one of the looms already 'Ascended', but not yet." He relaxed against the tree, his bent knees straining against the patches in his leggings.

"Were you helping your mother today?" Noni asked, eyeing some red welts on Twig's hands.

"Oh, you noticed," he responded, hiding them between his knees. "Yes, before sun-return. She wanted more honeycomb for Market. I hate those bees. Wish Ma would let me use Magic, but she says weak Magic makes the honey taste bad. I have to learn new spells for that." He raised his shoulders, as if to protect his neck from a swarm of insects.

Noni, who had just eaten the last bite of her pastry, felt Twig's eyes on her, but ignored him. She knew what he was going to ask next, because he asked it every holiday. She knew he wanted to help her, yet every time he asked, it hurt just a bit more. He didn't know she still tried to 'Reach', still hoped for some Magic; still shed tears after each failed attempt. She stiffened, as if preparing for attack.

Twig pulled at grass blades, uprooting several shoots. "Do you want to try doing some Magic today? Ma says the holiday might make it easier for you."

"Twig, you've asked me that every holiday for the past I-don't-know-how-long, and I keep telling you. I simply cannot do Magic. I don't have the skill." She shook her head, guilt mixing with self-pity. Hadn't she just tried it this morning? Hadn't she just failed *again* to cast a spell? Why did she keep trying? And why couldn't she tell Twig how much she wanted to be like him? At that moment, she wanted to rip up Oma's book and feed the shreds to Betula's goat.

“But it’s so strange,” Twig protested. “You’re the only one in the village. Even the babies you take care of ....”

“My mother couldn’t do it, my grandmother couldn’t do it. The women in my family have never been Mages.” Noni’s fists clenched tighter at every word and she wanted to punch something with them. She stood to tower over Twig, one fist aimed at his head. All those pointless attempts, all that time wasted wanting something she could never have. She missed Oma so much. Frustration and loneliness exploded in her chest. She hated the look of pity on his face. With Magic so important to her friend, she had never told him about kenning. He would laugh at her and then give her that sad face again.

“We never will be Mages,” she almost shouted, “so just stop asking me. And thanks for the pasty, but I have to go in now.” She turned towards her door, but Twig caught her hand.

“But the festival,” he said, almost in a whisper. “Aren’t you going?”

The smile that had been in Twig’s voice was gone and Noni felt responsible. She paused, her back to Twig. Every festival was thrilling, with sounds, sights and smells to shake everyone into a happy mood. Traders came from Wintersett and as far away as King’s Port to hawk their foods, woven cloths and ironwork. Going with her mother was one of Noni’s favorite memories. Oma had stories about every village and every craft, and she would whisper them to Noni as they walked through the crowds, looking at oddities and wondering where they were from.

Twig pleaded again, “Come to the festival, please.”

She turned back to look at Twig. “I don’t know,” she said, her anger wavering. “I’m ... I’m busy. I have to ..., I have to clean. It’s a mess in there.”

“But, I can help you,” Twig offered eagerly. “Only one room, how long can it take? Then we can go.”

A movement over the flax field caught Noni’s eye and she watched a large loom slowly ‘Ascend’ and begin to twirl high above. A short section of bright blue cloth was already completed; light from the lowering sun turned it purple. She heard the sound of the loom’s treadle and she caught her breath.

In the past few weeks, as Twig’s Magic skills had expanded, it had become more difficult for her to spend time with him. In fact, when she recalled her loneliness since Oma’s death, she realized that she’d been avoiding nearly everyone in the village. Then she looked at his face again. There it was. He was feeling sorry for her. She shook herself again and finally decided.

“*Never.*” She took a breath to pull in her anger and when it was locked in her chest, she spoke more quietly. “Twig, I don’t want to. You go without me. I’m too tired. Tell me about it tomorrow.” Without looking at him, she walked into her hut. Leaning against the wall, her eyes squeezed shut, she heard him calling. With one hand pressed to her chest, she wiped tears from her face with the other.

# CHAPTER TWO



“R

emind me again why the Princess of Sarony has asked us to do this.” It had been a rough journey for DeBoyas, starting with the ship from Saron Port, on which he’d been violently seasick for the entire crossing to King’s Port. Attacked by dogs in Oakwater, chased by a bull outside of Sett and stung by bees whenever they passed fields of flowers, he was beginning to feel like a lodestone for bad luck. Now, as they neared Windrow, he was crammed once again into the smallest space in the wagon, between vats of honey and bags of spices. From a central staff, a large rough-woven cloth was draped as a rain cover. A narrow gap at the front allowed him to talk to his partners. He felt sticky and had been about to sneeze for an hour.

Pintz, who was ‘Guiding’ the wagon, spoke not a word and DeBoyas glowered at his back. Wanda turned in time to see the echo of that glower and chided DeBoyas.

“Tsk,” she clicked at him. “You oughtta be more grateful. We got the important stage of Sarony’s invasion. When we’ve finished, Her Highness’s army won’t have to lift a finger. Not to mention our invention’ll make us famous and wealthy. Huh, these Mitlerian farmers’ll never know what hit ‘em.”

“But why must I be squashed like this?” DeBoyas moaned. “Why can’t you, or him, be the one that stays hidden?” DeBoyas’ resentment was growing. All those weeks ago, he hadn’t realized what Wanda and Pintz had meant when they’d offered him the “secret seat” on this mission for the Princess. Now that he’d endured two months of it, he was ready to switch places with someone.

“You know we can’t change our plans after we’ve gone on so long.” Wanda faced forward again and her voice came back to DeBoyas as though muffled by a wall of daub. “Nearly done, anyhow. Soon, we can go home to Saron Port. Back to pubs and good ale. Back to a feather bed,” Wanda sighed, “and decent bread.”

DeBoyas saw Pintz’s back stiffen and wondered if this meant that another bit of bad luck was on its way. It had always come whenever he complained and he suspected Pintz had Magicked every mishap of the mission. Yet he couldn’t control his habit of whining at the slightest difficulty and was about to begin again when Pintz ‘Descended’ the wagon to the ground.

DeBoyas peered through a hole in the canvas and saw they had arrived at another market. The darkening evening sky reminded him how hungry he was. A grunt from Wanda signaled she had gotten out as well. He chuckled gleefully to think of the effort she had to make, to move her large bulk. Before landing at King’s Port, she had moved with ease, as though young and agile. But now her knees creaked and she lumbered like an ox, even when ‘Ascending’. She blamed the weather.

The canvas quietly came away and DeBoyas felt suddenly naked, exposed to the sky for the first time since leaving the last village, Peri. The wagon wobbled slightly, then steadied as it made contact with the ground, resting on wheels that never turned.

“Anyone around?” he softly called to his unseen partners. “Is it safe for me to get out?”

“Wait a bit,” Wanda warned in a whisper. “Someone may notice us setting up and come over. Wait for the tent.”

A barrel against which DeBoyas was leaning rose suddenly and he nearly fell backwards. He used the additional space to stretch his legs, admiring the effect of his shoes’ long toe-points arching towards his ankles. He brushed a bit of lint from the left one and then raised his feet slightly to tilt them back and forth as though dancing against the side of the wagon.

“Now,” Wanda signaled.

He ‘Ascended’ and looked around to find the tent. Pintz stood nearby, his chin lowered and his hands moving as he ‘Dressed’ the wagon in its public finery. DeBoyas crossed his legs and sat in the air, watching the colors and banners appear below him that would turn the wagon into a gorgeous caravan. A gilded crest rose from the wagon bed and fastened itself to the front.

“You idiot,” Wanda hissed at him, “get down from there.”

Pintz’s hands paused briefly as he looked at DeBoyas.

“Right, right. But you can’t blame me for wanting some air,” DeBoyas answered. Inside the tent, he found their bedding piled at the back. With a flick of his wrist, his blanket unrolled and spread itself neatly on the floor. “Ahhhhhh,” he sighed as he lay down. How good it was to straighten his legs and hips and back at the same time. His hunger disappeared. Within moments he was asleep and he barely moved for the rest of the night.

At sun-return, DeBoyas awoke, starving and irate that his partners hadn’t roused him for supper. He sniffed the air and knew Wanda had cooked her usual breakfast of gruel. He was not sorry to have missed that. He also smelled something new, something savory and yeasty, with a bit of rosemary. It drew him to the tent flap, which he raised just enough to look around.

Pink clouds streaked across the sky and the Market was filling with ‘Ascended’ wagons floating by. Some of the drivers smoked pipes, others chewed barley stems and many counted out tallies on their fingers. Stakes and wagons clattered into position all around the Square. Pigs and lambs, fenced so tightly they could barely move, crowded in one area. Children chased each other, scrambling under tables and earning angry shouts from traders’ wives.

Near DeBoyas, a farmer ‘Ascended’ his breads into neat pyramids on the wagon bed, then gently flicked his hands to open one side of the wagon. As a precaution against the ‘Reach’ of children, the farmer covered each pyramid with heavy domed ‘Wards’ that he ‘Locked’ with a snap of his fingers.



Looking around, DeBoyas saw farmers arranging fruits, vegetables, eggs, cuts of meat, herbs, woven baskets, clay pots and beakers, tubs of dried fish, linen and wool cloth and punnets of fruit. Each trader seemed to have a pattern particular to himself. Back in Sarony, the merchants recklessly piled their goods anyhow, so DeBoyas admired the care the Mitlerians took. One woman's round pastries were stacked in a spiral and looked like they were rolling uphill. He tried 'Reaching' for one, but the woman caught it, turning quickly to see who would be brazen enough to thief while she was standing there.

"One drawback to Mitlerian care," he muttered, "too easy to spot a filcher."

Although DeBoyas knew the woman hadn't discovered him, he decided he couldn't risk another attempt and he looked towards Wanda's fire smoldering outside the tent. A chunk of grilled meat sat on a flat stone, probably meant for Pintz, but DeBoyas didn't care. He pointed his forefinger and the meat rose slightly. DeBoyas stuck his head out of the tent a bit more to glance around, but seeing no one, he 'Reached' the meat straight into his hand. Within moments, he was licking his fingers to get the last drops of the tasty grease.

Still hungry, DeBoyas peered out again and wondered where Wanda and Pintz had gone. He spotted a bag of the hoar-apples that Wanda favored and 'Reached' for it, but nothing happened. When he tried again, the bag shifted slightly, as though its contents were struggling against an invisible wall.

"Them's my apples," Wanda hissed as she roughly slapped his hand down.

DeBoyas, at the end of his patience, decided to step out of the tent, but before his feet had budged, Pintz's form filled the entry and DeBoyas cowered back. He wasn't afraid of Wanda, whose bulk slowed her down, but Pintz's silence hid an immense power that DeBoyas wasn't ready to challenge.

Pintz came inside, followed closely by Wanda and signaled the other two to sit. DeBoyas stared at his partners, wondering which would break the silence. Finally, Wanda spoke.

"We got just this village and Wintersett and then we're done." She rubbed her hands, creating a whush-whush noise that made DeBoyas' skin creep across the back of his neck. "Then we head back to King's Port and catch sail to Sarony. We need only one day here, p'raps three in Wintersett and some for 'Travel' ..." She paused to tally the days, her upturned eyes reminding DeBoyas of dead fish.

Her calculations complete, Wanda went on, "So I count two weeks to finish up."

Pintz raised his chin and DeBoyas thought he was going to speak, but he only jerked it at a corner of the tent.

"Yep," Wanda answered Pintz's implied question, "we have enough, in fact, more 'n enough. The Princess's ministers never believed how powerful our concoction was, so o' course they had us make and bring lots more 'n we needed."

"When we finish, mightn't we leave it behind?" DeBoyas wondered aloud. "Why carry all that when it's no longer useful?" More room in the wagon would solve one problem.

Pintz shook his head. The others waited, for it seemed that Pintz would finally say something. “We must destroy it,” he said in a voice so deep and full that it carried its own echo. “It cannot be left for others to use against us. We’ll carry it until we find the right place.”

Wanda’s eyes widened at the thought, but DeBoyas scoffed.

“But how would anyone know about our, I mean, your ‘Gifts’?” he asked, trying to wheedle Pintz and Wanda with flattery. “I mean, how would they know we’re responsible? If anyone had made that connection, surely there’d be large groups of people looking for us and that magnificent caravan.” DeBoyas hoped the last two words sounded like a compliment and not like the sarcasm he felt. No matter how much he admired the gorgeous caravan, he had grown to hate its plainer form in which he had to spend so much time.

“Maybe they are,” Wanda offered, “and they just ain’t found us. We don’t leave no tracks, so who can follow us? Pintz here makes sure to give our caravan different colors and banners at each town.”

Pintz’s voice filled the tent again. “There is always a chance. So we must carry it until we can destroy it, all of it, even the barrels. We take no chance that even a single one is left.”

Wanda closed her eyes and sighed, a huge smile nearly breaking her face in half. “Whatever happens to the ‘Gifts’, we’ll be goin’ home soon. Princess Saronia’ll be pleased with our report.”

“But,” DeBoyas interrupted, “what if the effects aren’t permanent?”

“You saw what happened to the Princess’s Minister for Health, when we ‘Gifted’ him,” Wanda reminded him.

DeBoyas rubbed his face to disguise a smirk. Wanda was quick to take credit for the ‘Gifting’, although he’d been the one doing it. His revenge was near, so he squashed his disdain and concentrated on what she was saying.

“Weeks o’ trying,” she giggled, “but no change. The minister lost everything. Everything.” She rubbed her hands together again. “I heard he decided to become a fisherman. Imagine.”

Pintz stood and left the tent, signaling the start of their day’s work.

“But my food,” DeBoyas complained. “No supper last night, no breakfast today. I’m starving.”

Wanda, glowering again at DeBoyas, ‘Reached’ some hoar-apples for him, as well as a loaf of bread and a chunk of sheep’s cheese. “Hurry it up. We’re ready for you.” She lifted the flap and glanced around the market. “I see customers’re startin’ to arrive,” she whispered as she exited the tent.

DeBoyas ate quickly, then prepared for his job. Much as he disliked his partners, he couldn’t help admiring their methods for accomplishing the task. Wanda, dressed as a simple farmer’s wife, smiled at the women, flirted with the men and hugged any child who

got close enough for her to grab, all while carrying on a non-stop palaver about her honey and spices. He could hear her voice now, as she drew potential buyers to the caravan.

“Yes, Dame and Sir,” Wanda was saying, “my honey is the best, from humblebees that find the readiest flowers what grow only west of the Zilfur Zee. These humblebees’re so particular, they knows ‘xactly when the flowers are ripest for milking and they knows which color o’ flower produces each flavor o’ honey. Here, these jars give you sky-blue cornflower honey, while here; we have ocean-blue cornflower honey. Only the well-trained tongues can tell the difference, but I promise you that the first honey is best for barley-beer and the second is suitable only for sun-return bread. And my spices, from lands so far north and west that only the strongest birds can fly that distance ....”

DeBoyas could hear the crowds gathering, so he quickly organized his materials. He knew that Pintz was standing behind Wanda and would soon be quietly accepting silver and ‘Reaching’ honey jars or spice packets into waiting hands. DeBoyas started working, doing the job for which he’d been hired, the job that required Magical dexterity of the highest degree. From inside the tent, he had to place tiny ‘Gifts’ into apron and trouser pockets, into open hands and gaping mouths, all without being able to see any of the people he was working on and without ‘Gifting’ Pintz or Wanda.

He closed his eyes and listened to Wanda. Many of her words were code: “honey” meant tall man, “flower” meant short woman, “tongue” meant child. But no code could fully describe the scene outside the tent and he relied more on his senses of smell and hearing to envision it. All day, shadows flitted through his head, each a person to be ‘Gifted’. He missed no one.

Pintz’s real job was not to trade jars or packets for payment, but to ensure that every person in the market—even those with their own items to sell—came inside the range of DeBoyas’ ‘Reach’. Wanda’s was to keep everyone there long enough to be ‘Gifted’. DeBoyas could rely on his partners to do their jobs well, so he worked quickly and carefully. Despite the discomforts and afflictions of the trip, he was pleased to show off his own skill, even if only two people witnessed it.

“But soon,” he thought, as he sent more ‘Gifts’ to open mouths and hands, “soon this task will be completed and I’ll be able to display my great skills to thousands. I’ll start with showing Wanda and Pintz a new trick.” He giggled while ‘Gifting’ a farmer’s family.

Later, after sun-fall, as the last of the other wagons ‘Ascended’ and left the market and no stragglers remained, Wanda brought DeBoyas more apples and a pastry she had ‘Reached’ from another seller. “I asked one o’ them peewees who came by, a girl with hair like a yeller halo, if everyone had come to the Market today and you know what she said?”

DeBoyas shook his head. He was tired, but it would be good to know if they had to visit any sick or frail people who’d been unable to attend.

“She told me, ‘Of course, mistress lady, all except the beekeeper. She never comes to market.’” Wanda laughed. “Mistress lady, have you ever heard anything so sweet? You got all the babies, didn’t you?”

“Tchah,” DeBoyas sniffed, “of course.”

“Good. We have only the beekeeper,” Wanda said on her way out. “Her hut’s on the road to Wintersett, so you can ‘Gift’ her as we pass. Her children were at the Market, no need to bother about them.”

DeBoyas flicked his fingers in frustration, Piercing tiny pinholes in the canvas. Proud as he was of his Magical skills, he hated having to ‘Gift’ someone in their own home. The complications of getting past ‘wards’ required effort and he’d had a long day.

Wanda poked her head inside the tent to tell DeBoyas, “It’s time.”

He sighed, took a final stretch and then ‘Ascended’ through the tent opening and into the open back of the wagon—no longer a gorgeous caravan—where he was soon wedged between barrels and sacks. Well before morning, the wagon and tent were halfway to Wintersett, the beekeeper easily ‘Gifted’ at sun-fall as she tended her hives.

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