

Act I, Scene I

(Preset: The final moments of twilight. The snow-covered hilltop, Strega Nona's tiny house and, nearby, the even tinier goatsbed wherein live Strega Nona's pet animals and her helper Big Anthony. In the distance, a valley with village square, church and surrounding cottages.)

(House lights fade. Preset gives way to a night of blue shadows and white, shimmering stars.)

NARRATOR Once upon a Christmastime, near a little town in Calabria, Italy, there lived an old lady called Strega Nona – Grandma Witch..

(Within the house, a light from the cupped hands of Strega Nona illumines her face.)

She made magic to help people, in her little house high on the hill, along with Bambolona – the Baker's daughter – who had come to stay and learn Strega Nona's wonderful secrets.

(Light from Strega's hands broadens to include Bambolona, standing at her side, gazing in wonder.)

And there was also Big Anthony – who never paid attention

(Light now includes Big Anthony, gazing too.)

Big Anthony was Strega Nona's helper, but he wished that someday he, too, could learn of magic...

STREGA NONA
No more magic!

BIG ANTHONY & BAMBOLONA
Strega Nona?!

BAMBOLONA
No more magic?!

BIG ANTHONY
Never?!

STREGA NONA
No, Big Anthony. Only until *Natale*.

BIG ANTHONY
Natale?

STREGA NONA & BAMBOLONA
Christmas.

BIG ANTHONY
No magic until Christmas? But when will that be? Soon?

BAMBOLONA

No, Big Anthony. *Natale* is a whole month away.

STREGA NONA

(Indicating wreath) See here, Anthony – the candles on the wreath? They will help to count the weeks.

BIG ANTHONY

Four candles.

BAMBOLONA

One for each week.

STREGA NONA

Yes, children, tonight begins the season of “Advent.”

BIG ANTHONY

“Advent”...

STREGA NONA

And this is an “Advent Wreath.” But quick – before the magic fades away – time to light the first candle.

(Bambolona ignites a taper from the light in Strega’s hands, which then fades. Strega Nona sings.)

*WITH THE TOUCH OF A FLAME GOLDEN BRIGHT
BRIGHT AS SHIMMERING STARS IN THE NIGHT
MARK THE WEEKS AS WE PASS THROUGH THE SEASON OF LIGHT
LET US QUICK LIGHT A WICK LIGHT A CANDLE*

*WHEN THE ADVENT WREATH CANDLE YOU LIGHT
WATCH YOUR CARES AND YOUR WORRIES TAKE FLIGHT
SAINTS ABOVE! COULD THERE BE A MORE BEAUTIFUL SIGHT?
AS WE QUICK LIGHT A WICK LIGHT A CANDLE.*

*THOUGH WITH ADVENT COMES FROST IN THE AIR
DOESN’T MATTER – WE’VE NO TIME TO CARE!
SI! – SO MUCH TO BE DONE, BUT SO WHAT? – IT’S GREAT FUN!
GIFTS TO MAKE, SWEETS TO BAKE
HOUSE TO CLEAN, DECKED IN GREEN
JUST A MONTH TILL THE MORN OF THE DAY CHRIST WAS BORN:
THEN THE CHURCH BELLS WILL RING
HEAR THE CHOIR, HOW THEY SING!
WHAT A DAY! WONDROUS DAY! MAGIC DAY!*

Well? I get a little excited about Christmas...

*BE OUR GUIDE IN THE DARK, SHOW THE WAY
ADVENT CANDLE, PLEASE LEAD US, WE PRAY
TO THAT SWEET, HAPPY MIRACLE OF CHRISTMAS DAY
THEN THAT NIGHT WE WILL LIGHT THE LAST CANDLE.*

*SO COME CHRISTMAS, WHICH MAKES THE OLD YEAR
END IN HAPPINESS, YOUTH AND GOOD CHEER*

BUT EACH NIGHT TILL THE FEASTING AND FRIENDS WE HOLD DEAR
EVERY NIGHT WE SHALL LIGHT, LIGHT A CANDLE.

Oh, Bambolona...Big Anthony...how I do so love my little Advent wreath!

(In the distance below: many candlelit windows.)

BAMBOLONA

(Gazing out the window) Look! I can see my Papa's house. He lit a candle too! Happy Advent, Papa!

(They rush outside and gasp at the panorama.)

STREGA NONA

So many stars tonight! Ah, bella, bella!...how beautiful it is, Calabria!

BIG ANTHONY

Look

STREGA NONA

What, Anthony?

BIG ANTHONY

That star! It's growing...moving...bigger...closer! Like magic!

TREGA NONA & BAMBOLONA

(Variously) Magic? Could it be...

(In unison) The Christmas Star?!

STREGA NONA

Un miracolo!

(The distant sound of a boy's voice calling "Strega Nona!")

BIG ANTHONY

Why, Strega Nona – the star is calling your name!

(Call again: "Strega Nona!" is more clear.)

There it is again!

(Strega and Bambolona suddenly laugh.)

What's so funny?!

BAMBOLONA

Big Anthony, open your eyes and you'll see!

(Little Paolo enters, carrying a lantern.)

STREGA NONA

Well, hello, little Paolo!

BIG ANTHONY

(Looking at Paolo) You mean...

BAMBOLONA

That's right, Big Anthony. Little Paolo and his lantern.

BIG ANTHONY

(To Paolo) You're not a star!

LITTLE PAOLO

I'd *like* to be.

STREGA NONA

And I think I know something else you'd like: a nice warm cup of chocolata!

LITTLE PAOLO

Oh, yes, Strega Nona – please!

(Bambolona leads Paolo inside.)

BIG ANTHONY

Hot chocolate by the fire- that *does* sound good!

(Strega Nona stops him at the doorstep.)

STREGA NONA

Sorry, my young stargazer, but I'm afraid yours will have to wait until after you've fed the animals. *(Animals appear. Anthony groans.)*

Now, now, Anthony – you know very well that's your job. If you don't dawdle, it'll be done quick as magic.

BIG ANTHONY

"Magic." But that's just it, Strega Nona.

STREGA NONA

What?

BIG ANTHONY

Ever since I came to work for you, I've never understood why, with all your magic, we have to do any work in the first place!

STREGA NONA

(Meaningfully) Anthony?!

BIG ANTHONY

I know. You've told me before. It's a good thing to work.

STREGA NONA

That's right. And...?

BIG ANTHONY

"Magic only when nothing else will do."

STREGA NONA

That's right too. And...

BIG ANTHONY

"And?" You mean now there's more?

STREGA NONA

Think, Anthony. Can you remember what I said earlier tonight? "No magic..."

BIG ANTHONY

"...at Christmas!" Now I remember.

STREGA NONA

(Turning to enter her house) Bene. Good.

BIG ANTHONY

Why?

STREGA NONA

(Halting at the steps) Why what?

BIG ANTHONY

Why no magic at Christmas?

STREGA NONA

Ah. That is something you must learn for yourself. I cannot teach you that.

BIG ANTHONY

Because I wouldn't understand...because I'm stupid...

STREGA NONA

"Stupid?!" Anthony, what makes you say such a thing?

BIG ANTHONY

I just feel that way sometimes. Lots of times. Remember when I turned you into a toad? And that time I used your magic ring? And all the trouble I caused with your magic pasta pot...?

STREGA NONA

Yes, Big Anthony, I remember. But making mistakes now and then doesn't mean that you're stupid.

BIG ANTHONY

No?

STREGA NONA

No. In fact, maybe the trouble is that you are too clever!

BIG ANTHONY

Clever?! Me?!

(She gives him a tweak on the cheek and a pat on the hand, then enters the house while Anthony turns to his chores. Bambolona is pouring steaming water into cups for hot chocolate as Paolo stirs each cup with a spoon.)

STREGA NONA

Ah, Bambolona! You've made the chocolata! Grazie! Now then, Little Paolo, tell your Grandma Witch the reason for this welcome visit.

BAMBOLONA

It's my Papa, Strega Nona.

STREGA NONA

Signore Bambo?

LITTLE PAOLO

He sent me with a message.

BAMBOLONA

Papa needs me...

LITTLE PAOLO

(Showing a coin) And see? He gave me a coin so I'd hurry.

STREGA NONA

Tell me, Bambolona, is something the matter?

BAMBOLONA

Yes! Christmas!