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The Conspiracy

A Never Realm Tale

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One of the mysteries of the universe is the fact most people don't see what is going on right before their eyes.

Cloak's jet-black hair flowed over the top of the dark material from which she took her name. The colors matched so well, from a distance, they appeared as one. As if the cloak had a hood. At the same time, her ink-black, gleaming boots also seemed a natural extension of the bottom of the garment. All this contrasted with her smooth alabaster skin. The type of flesh only youth perfected. It was a shining contrast of shades and extraordinary features. In the past, she once had another name, but no one else could recall it. Even though she was only 22, the time when she was referred to by something different seemed as if it were ages ago. Now, she was known only as Cloak.

Cloak approached the entrance of the Thieves Guild of the Great City. No one paid any attention. This is not to say Cloak wasn't worthy of attention. She was. It would be fair to say almost every eye on the street was glued to her appearance. She was the type of young woman who drew this kind of attention. One wouldn't be remiss to call their actions staring. Although leer would have been as appropriate. She could go anywhere, simply because no one saw her as a threat.

This was all thanks to the black material which was draped over her shoulders. When she wore it, observers were overcome with a feeling of security and wellbeing. It is well-known wizards tend to use arcane garments of invisibility, but Cloak preferred the spell which was cast upon her vestment. It allowed her to interact freely with people. To gain their secrets. Men were especially willing to give up their secrets when she wore the inky-dark material. Some women were as well. No matter the company, as long as she wore it, she could always draw blade first.

She passed under the oversize sign which hung above the entrance door. It read, 'May the gods of the sky grant us health. May the gods of the underworld grant us strength. Everything else we can steal.' Hidden guards on both sides stepped out of the shadows. They made no attempt to impede her progress. They merely stepped closer to get a more favorable view. Cloak had a cotton-down smell to her which only enhanced her appearance. The haze they felt as they breathed in this aroma meant they would forget everything they saw in the next few minutes. She threw the two men an easy grin as she slipped past them.

Walking around like this had some serious risks. If she ever ran into someone who was immune to the effects of the material, she would be uniquely exposed. But she was prepared to face those. It certainly held no more risk than faced every day by the women of the emperor's harem and those the working in the pleasure houses. Wearing it, however, granted her far more power than those who found themselves in these other distinctive institutions.

The halls of the guild were made of dark gray stones which filled the corridors with deep shadows, regardless of how many lanterns shed light from the ceiling. The maze-like structure was designed to confuse and disorient any who were not uniquely familiar with its twists and turns. Cloak, however, found men who were happy -- even eager -- to give her the appropriate directions. Once in the main chamber, people looked up at her, but they kept their seats. Only the man at the back of the room kept his head buried in his work. He repeatedly scribbled ink to parchment. Scratching out accounts and values in neat columns for the guild's records. She approached the high table, leaning over its hard, wooden surface suggestively.

“Logan,” she smiled. Batting her eyelashes accordingly.

The man never looked up. He continued his efficacious scribbling. “What do you want Cloak?”

He was clean shaven with a jutting jaw and a sharp nose. His deep-set eyes had a glassy look to them. As if the constant scribbling was making him blind. Even for a man of his rank, he wore the street clothes of a cutpurse. Tattered browns and worn greens. A long, nail-like dagger miraculously appeared sinking deep in the page where he was about to write the next figure. Logan glanced up to see Cloak’s hand gripping the weapon’s hilt. “I want to know about the princess.” She informed him.

Logan sighed and leaned back in his chair. “Look, we have an understanding, the Thieves and the Assassin’s guilds. We don’t run around killing people indiscriminately and you don’t go around robbing everyone blind. Beyond these simple rules, we stay out of each other’s way.”

With a flick of her wrist, the dagger’s point flashed from the page to a sensitive spot below his chin. Cloaked smiled. “You’re leaving out the part where the royal families are off limits,” she replied. “It hard to get any serious work done when the imperial army is breathing down your neck.”

Logan tried to pull away, but she kept the point tight to his flesh. “If everyone is so sure we have her, why isn’t the imperial army crashing down my door right now?” he asked softly.

“The family wanted this handled quietly,” Cloak responded. “Now tell me where she is.”

Logan cleared his throat. “Would you mind covering up. You’re making it rather had to concentrate.”

Cloak pressed the dagger until drops of blood began dripping down the blade. “Just enjoy the view. Now, talk you squealy-eyed blowfish. What have you done with her?”

He exhaled heavily. “Logan. Overlord class. Serial number six nine one zero three two seven eight.”

“Don’t give me that,” Cloak blurted out. “I’m trying to help you out here. If the family does send the imperial army, General Chang will burn the place down with you inside it. That is after an extensive period of torture.”

Logan’s eyes stared straight ahead. He hesitated. “I ... I ...”

“Come on,” Cloak gave him a stern look. “Take the help. It’s the only offer you’re going to get.” The blade disappeared. Cloak pulled her shoulders back. The effect was impressive. Mesmerizing in fact.

“I have to hand it to you,” Logan stumbled over the words. “You have an impressive,” he swallowed, “advanced interrogation technique. I take it the plan is to break down my will to resist. Overload my senses with your delights. Then I tell you everything you want to know, right?” Cloak leaned forward. Logan was fixated on the two, perfectly spherical, gold coin-sized objects floating before his eyes. They were impressive. Marveling at the sight, he had to fight to keep from drooling. Cloak could see his resistance breaking down as the blood flowed out of his brain to other parts of his body.

Logan shuddered. “You’re ignoring one other possibility,” his eyes clouded over as he answered her.

“Which is?”

He swallowed. “The possibility no one kidnapped her at all. You’re ignoring the possibility she joined up of her own free will. Life in the palace can be a little relentless at times. I hear her father wanted to marry her off to some puss-filled, double-chinned nobleman from the far north. Maybe she didn’t want to marry the ugly lout.”

“Are you telling me she’s become a member of the guild?”

“I ... I ...” he stumbled, “I’m just saying. It might not be what you think. I hear the northern provinces are maddeningly cold, even in high summer. Crappy weather too.”

Cloak was impressed with his level of resistance. Most men would have already given her their bank account numbers and home address by now. “Come on,” she hissed, “you don’t expect me to buy a story which smells as made up as a forged coin, do you?” she scoffed at him.

“Was there a ransom note?”

“What?”

He leaned forward. “Did they leave behind a ransom note? A list of demands?” They stared at each other in silence. “Even the Prime Minister, who believe me, has a thousand reasons to snatch the girl, would have left a note. A communiqué of some kind. After all, Kidnappers always want something, don’t they?”

Cloak took in a deep breath. The effect caused Logan to breathe in a lungful of air with a gulp. As she leaned back, Logan craned his neck forward to follow ... until his chest ran abruptly into the cold, wooden table. The effect seemed to wake him up. “I’m not telling you anything else,” he spat. “Logan. Overlord class. Serial number six nine one zero three two seven eight.”

“Yea, I got your number already.” She pondered the point he had been trying to make. It made a disturbing amount of sense. She leaned back in to get his attention focused again. “So, let’s assume you’ve got your story straight. If she joined up, then she has to be here.” She flashed a wide smile, “So you can tell me where she is.”

Logan hesitated, “I can’t divulge the whereabouts of a guild member. Such information is sacrosanct. I’d be drummed out. Nailed to a rail. Cut up into so many pieces rats would think they were leftovers from another vermin’s dinner.”

Cloak leaned closer. “So, she did join up.”

Logan jumped up from his chair. “I never admitted to any such thing!” he shouted. “I was merely suggesting an alternative theory which fit the described facts. Nothing more. Speculation does not constitute fact.” From the look of things, Logan’s mind was beginning to fray around the edges. He was appreciating the effect the cool building air had on his viewing angle. His eyes started to look like two melting ice cubes.

Noting the effect, Cloak closed in for the kill. “If I was looking for her, where would I find her?”

“She’s not here,” Logan stammered.

“Really?”

“Would I lie to ...” he paused to swallow, “... to those?” He pointed at the two delightful objects before him.

“No,” Cloaked grinned, “I don’t think you’d be able to. Do you know where I can find her.”

“No,” he stammered. She leaned in and kissed him on the forehead. With a loud thud caused by the impact of his head on the surface of the table, he passed out.



The streets behind the bazaar are dusty and dry. This part of town was filled with the colonnaded stalls of the city’s shadier entrepreneurs. Hansa Sandstorm, the boy conjurer, didn’t have an office here. But this was where he was most apt to be found. Hansa had never been taught any of the dark arts or how to use them. He was simply a bystander when the Great Audacious was killed. The spells in the master wizard’s head jumped out and buried themselves in Hansa’s head. They moved into him with the same eagerness as some evil poltergeist intent on finding an unwilling victim. Hansa had no idea how to call on them. They came out when they wanted.

Hansa clothes weren’t so much dirty as they were a canvas upon which the dirt was painted. His dark, unruly hair and thin body were such that if he stood on his head one might mistake him for a mop. It was his bright blue eyes which made him unique. As bright as the sky, they were the type which appeared to peer into your very soul when they stared at you.

Sadly, Hansa had few real skills. Even as a day laborer he found it hard to find work. Most employers weren’t too keen on hiring someone with dangerous spells in their head which couldn’t be controlled. In fact, they generally wanted him as far away as possible. In case something went off randomly or -- worse yet -- the spells decided to seek a new host.

He performed the odd job down at the docks, carrying cargo out the hold of foreign ships. Vessels crewed by people who didn’t recognize him. When trade was slow, he often didn’t eat. Today the wind was fair, but it was blowing out to sea. The ships on the horizon would take some time to get into port. So, he hung around the back streets of the bazaar, hoping for a handout. Or a chance to go through some fresh trash. Food which wasn’t even fit for slaves to eat. Like most destitute peasant boys, he had a skilled nose for food. In fact, Hansa’s sense of smell was the only exceptional quality he possessed. At least this one he controlled. He was better than even skilled bloodhounds.

“Get out of here, boy,” a shopkeeper yelled at him.

“Wash yourself in the river,” another cried. “Get rid of some of your stench.”

“You should apply for the Imperial Guard,” a third one yelled, “They don’t care if some of their men blow up.”

Hansa sunk his head lower and scuffed his feet in the dirt as he wandered off. “The gods take a dim view of those without charity,” he retorted. Turning the corner, Hansa was suddenly drenched by a bucket of clean water. “I wish you wouldn’t do that,” he complained.

Wiping the water from around his eyes with the back of his hands, he looked up to see Cloak. She was picking up another bucket of water. He closed his eyes as he was drenched in the water a second time. From the smell of it, this one contained soap. "Do we have to go through this every time?" he asked.

"You stink," Cloak replied. "I'm not letting everyone we want to talk to run away because you smell, boy."

Hansa gave her his most pleasant smile. "You have a job for me?"

"I do."

His grin showed all his pearly white teeth. Even as the third bucket of water crashed over his head, rinsing off the soap. "What does it pay?" he asked.

"Money."

"Well, as luck would have it," Hansa spit out some of the soapy water from his mouth, "That's my favorite form of payment."

The sun was hot, so there was little need to dry off. His skin was half dry already. Although a few drops still gleamed on his skin. In a few minutes, you would not even be able to tell his clothes had recently been soaked. In the meantime, Hansa enjoyed the cooling effects of the water. He was too young for Cloak's attire to have the usual effect on him. Still, he liked Cloak and felt safe in her presence. "What do we have to do?"

Cloak explained her assignment to retrieve the princess and return her to the palace. She explained the information she'd received from the Thieves' Guild and the fact the guild might be hiding her.

"What do you want me to do?" Hansa asked.

"We're going to use some of those spells of yours," Cloak explained.

Hansa shook his head. The spells were there all right. He could feel them rolling around in his head. But they wouldn't come out. No matter how hard he tried, they stayed put. The only time they would come out was when they felt like it. They were like a petulant little brother, refusing to come outside to play. Perhaps because old Audacious had been male, Cloak had a knack for getting the spells she wanted to cast themselves.

She placed a hand on the boy's mop-like head. Cloaked adjusted her stance to be – well more alluring. The boy didn't even seem to notice, but the old man's spells were enthralled with the resulting view. Thunder and lightning could be seen and heard, even though there wasn't a cloud in the sky. The dust on the ground seemed to move and swirl about on the ground. It was like a tiny set of tornadoes, casting the earth about. Once everything settled, there was a clear map on the ground. The streets of the Great City were drawn in the sand as if someone had poked the road with a stick. Every alley and side street could be seen as a scrape in the dirt. The great wall was a line of pebbles surrounding the lines. Hansa could see the nineteen gates of the city. From the Deserted Gate, a line was forming. The kind of trail an insect would leave in its path. Only there was no bug at its end. It grew longer, snaking its way across the open road. Far from the Great City, the line stopped, and a thin reed blew down from the sky and drove itself into the earth at the end of the trail.

“Hardly a place for a Thieves’ Guild branch.” Cloak pointed out. “It looks like an unpopulated area. Not much chance for any reasonable looting.”

“Maybe it’s a hideout,” Hansa suggested.

“Perhaps.”

“It’s pretty far,” Hansa lamented.

“Well, we’d better get going then,” replied Cloak as she carefully used her foot to erase the map on the road.

“What did you do that for?” Hansa asked.

“No need to tell everyone in the world where we are going, is there?”

Together they marched off in the direction of the great city’s wall, the ruins of a one-time map glittering in the sun behind them. As the two of them walked, stones and trigs in the street formed themselves into arrows, pointing toward the Deserted Gate. Even so, they quickly dispersed moments before they were walked upon.

“Can we get some horses?” inquired Hansa.

“There are those who would follow the tracks of two horses out by themselves.” She remarked. “But two sets of footprints gather little attention. Besides,” she laughed, “You don’t know how to ride a horse. You’d fall off the animal and break your scrawny leg.”

“You don’t know that,” he protested. “I could know how to ride a horse.”

“Do you?”

“No. But I could.”

“You have big dreams, little man.”

“Well, I don’t have much else.”

The Deserted Gate was not manned in the sense the name implied. It had a full complement of staff which checked each person entering or leaving the city. Its name was derived from the desolate landscape on the other side. Long stretches of open ground and scrub brush. Water was scarce along this route as the journey was across a near desert. No, it was called the Deserted Gate because so few people when through it, the land on the other side being so inhospitable. Still, there was a merchant’s wagon at the gate. The rickety Bedouin cart with four goats tied to the back. The guards were engaged in questioning the driver and searching the wagon.

They paused as Cloak and Hansa approached. The guard’s eyes followed Cloak as she walked through the gate, but no one stepped in to impede her progress. As she and her companion walked out into the wilderness, their ire returned to the Bedouin cart and the argument they were having with its owner. The transit fee through the gate had to be paid they insisted, regardless of the quality of the merchandise in the cart. No one seemed to even be aware they had let Cloak and her associate pass

without so much as a copper coin changing hands. An outside observer would have found this highly unusual. But fortunately for Cloak, none were present.



The armies lined up across from each other occupying most of the rolling field. Men in gleaming plate and chainmail armor stood in neatly formed squares. Their spear points bristled until their formations resembled a metallic porcupine. Birds flying overhead would have seen the array of warriors as if they were a chess board. The squares in the second ranks were close enough to fill the gaps in the first line; should the need arise.

Opposing them was a disorganized mass of orcs waving their weapons in the air and screaming their battle cries. They milled about in a sloppy display of ill-discipline. They were equipped with an odd verity of swords, knives, spears, axes, and hammers. No two of their shields looked the same. It was a screaming hoard of rabid individualists. Standing behind them was a stone giant, decked out in the livery of a king. A rough formed golden crown sitting jauntily upon his misshapen head. Outnumbering his opponents by a little over two to one, he seemed unperturbed by the mob-like quality of his force.

Prancing behind the squares of men, perched upon a brilliant white horse, was Princess Flower. The sixth daughter of the imperial family. The armor she wore was far from the normal silk attire of the royals. The sword she carried was long and the hilt was made of an elaborate brocade of gold and gems. Behind her rode a gaggle of officers, generals, and military lackeys. Compared to the magnificence of the princess's horse, her staff seemed to be riding dark haired nags.

"Are we prepared?" asked Flower.

"All prepared," a senior ranked officer replied. "The field will soon be bathed in the blood of your enemies."

Flower pulled up her mount. "What will be our force depletion?"

"Excuse me, your grace?"

"How many men will we lose?"

"A few of our men will fall, your grace, no doubt," he remarked casually. "But they will be the lesser fighters. The survivors will be stronger. Forged in the heat of battle."

"How many will run away?" she asked.

"None, your grace. They are your stalwart men."

"They'd better not," Flower sneered. "See to it. I'm taking off one of your fingers for each man who cowardly leaves the field. Then I'm going to start in on your toes."

The officer cringed. "There is nothing to be concerned about, your grace. There will be no retreat. Your forces will prevail."

"I want this field fertilized with dead orcs, commander."

Bugles in the distanced bellowed. Drums thundered. Feet stomped the ground. One of the man-squares opened and out strode a warrior, covered head to toe in armor. Even the color of his eyes, hidden behind the narrowest of slits, were hard to discern. Instead of the usual spear, he carried a long, two-handed sword. His opponent, now forcing his way through the crowd of orcs was a troll. His only armor was a small dented helm, which teetered on his head, threatening to fall off at any moment. His weapon of choice seemed to be a massive hammer. There was enough metal in this hammer's head to have forged his opponent's complete set of armor ... and still have plenty to spare.

The two circled each other in the space between the armies.

"Why are we doing this?" asked Flower.

"It's the tradition."

Flower snorted. "Isn't bashing each other brains in also a tradition for these kinds of things?"

"Yes, your grace. Naturally."

Flower reigned in her unsteady horse. "Well then, why don't we skip this part and go straight to the bashing."

"It's too late for changes in the schedule, your grace."

"Get on with it!" Flower yelled at the participants.

As if following her command, the knight's sword rang against the troll's hide. It bounced off, having little impact. The troll returned the knight's swing with one of his own. The knight deftly stepped out of the arc of the hammer. It fell to the ground, striking a large boulder. The troll grunted as the bolder split wide open. The two spent some more time circling. Pausing to throw a blow here and another there. The knight ducked each blow and the troll simply ignored the fact the knight even had a sword. It didn't look good. In such heavy armor, the knight would soon begin to slow. The troll merely had to wait until the knight's movements slackened enough for him to land a blow. One would be enough.

What is plain to everyone to see is the fact that trolls have hairy armpits. This is no surprise; most people are afflicted with the same condition. Which, of course, resulted in the whole razor industry. What most people don't realize is hair simply will not grow out of skin as hard as a rock. As the troll lifted his hammer above his head to bring it crashing to the ground, the knight nimbly slipped the point of his sword into the creature's underarm.

The troll screamed, and the knight withdrew his sword. Even fewer people know of the major artery which flows through the troll's shoulder joint. The troll reacted wildly, spinning in circles and pounding the ground with his hammer. He looked like a red sprinkler system irrigating a farmer's field in crimson as he spun. His roars increased, as did the violence of his blows. Without so much as a preamble, the troll crashed -- face first -- into the ground. A cloud of dust rose into the air and the body spasmed a few times and then broke apart, leaving nothing but a pile of boulders on the ground where the troll had once been. You tend to get this kind of thing with silicon-based lifeforms.

There was a moment of silence, to honor the dead, for about half a second. Then the entire orc hoard charged. The king screamed orders, but he might as well have been howling at a castle wall for all the

good it did him. When the mass of crazed brutes reached the massed spear points, they stopped. They began tossing their fellows into the air, to land in the square's centers. The men surged forward, points extended. In a matter of seconds, the scene turned to a mass of chaos.

Chaos Theory speaks of complex systems whose behavior is highly sensitive to slight changes in conditions so that small alterations can give rise to strikingly great consequences. But these theorists had not had to deal with a charging mass of crazed orcs. In fact, your average mathematician rarely encounters any orcs in the ivory towers they so frequently inhabit. If they did, Chaos Theory would more closely describe the raw insanity which was only now occurring on the field.

Swords flashed, hammers rang. Shields and bodies flew through the air. Random bits of armor sailed into the sky with explosive force. A choking cloud of dust soon enveloped the entire scene. Your average general might have sent in his reserves at this point, to act as reinforcements. But as it was impossible to discern where best to send them, they remained immobile. Banners fluttering, spears at the ready. Flower stood by, gazing calmly at her nails.

Slowly the din receded. The thunderous sound of two great armies thrashing away at each other was reduced to the clamor of a few legions. Things wound down to the level of cohorts and finally a group or two. When the dust settled, the orc army looked like a pile of roasted pork. What few men survived wandered about in confusion. Many looked dazed. Those who still had their wits about them were either wounded or exhausted. It seemed only a victory for the ravens, who were already at their work. Pecking out the soft tissue of the dead.

"Well, that was a complete waste of time," Flower snorted.



Hansa pointed at a red tent. "Is that the one?" Cloak asked.

"It's the only one I smell silk in." Hansa snorted. "You know any generals who wear silk?"

Cloak and Hansa entered the command tent. While everyone stared, no one stopped them. It was not your typical command tent. The inside of the tent appeared as if a page had been torn from a Turkish pillow bazaar. Rich carpets complimented the canvas tent color. The candles, which were spread liberally across the interior were scented. At its core, the tent looked little different from the pleasure rooms of the palace. No, it was not your normal command tent. Now, the rack they were torturing a prisoner on ... well, that looked normal. Flower was dressed in her formal attire of silk brocade. The robe was long and flowing, dragging behind her on the ground. Her long black hair had almost the same texture as the silk. She had a dainty, unblemished appearance. The kind one only finds in youth who have never done any true labor. The princess was still not out of her teens. Yet she had an appearance whose effect was not unlike Cloak's. Generals had difficulty not drooling in her presence. She turned to Cloak and Hansa as they approached. "What do you want? It's not the time for that yet. Maybe later tonight."

"Begging your pardon, your grace." Cloak tried to be on her best behavior. "Your father, the emperor, wishes you to return to the palace. He's quite concerned."

“I’m not surprised,” Flower explained. “The old fart is always concerned about something. Tell him to take a potion and calm down.”

Cloak gave her a half smile. “He’s also requesting you return the imperial army.”

Flower’s face creased into a grimace. “Well, he can’t have it back right now. I’m using it.”

“I don’t think you understand.”

“You don’t understand,” Flower insisted. “There are creatures in the woods. Foul, benighted beasts who must be exterminated before they can spread their filth across the valley floor like a plague.”

Cloak adjusted her stance. “Your father also wishes to remind you he has a treaty with the tribes you are attacking.”

“Treaty?” Flower repeated in a high-pitched voice. “What my father doesn’t understand is that you can’t have a treaty which unclean monsters. The only things a worthy ruler does with such filth is to arrange their extermination.”

“Although it might seem so to you at this time,” Cloak tried to explain, “your father is of a different view. He orders you to return to the palace and cease your depredations at once.”

Flower’s face turned sour. The orc on the rack groaned. Although it was unlikely the two had any connection. “Who is going to make me?” The princess did an excellent impression of a grumpy teen. “You and what army?” she joked.

Cloak placed her hand gently on Hansa’s head. The spells inside instantly jumped to do their duty. The tent was filled with the scent of juniper and lavender. The princess frowned and looked at Cloak cross-eyed. Her head cocked to one side. Her eyelids closed only moments before she collapsed to the floor.

“The princess snores,” Hansa declared. “Do royals snore?”

“This one does.”

“She might be an imposter,” Hansa explained. Cloak turned her gaze at the boy and gave him a serious look. It took him a moment to realize what she was not saying. “Ok, she’s not an imposter. But she’s bigger than I am. How are we going to get her out of here?”

Cloak looked around the room. “Roll her up in one of the carpets.”

“She’s still too big,” Hansa protested.

“Just do it,” Cloak commanded.

Hansa dutifully rolled up the princess in one of the carpets. It didn’t seem to him a good disguise. the carpet was lumpy, and part of her red silk brocade was spilling out of one end. He made an attempt to stuff the material back into the carpet with limited success. “Now what?”

“Go outside and bring one of the carts into the tent,” Cloak told him, as she made a fruitless attempt to neaten up the rolled carpet.

“What if someone asks what I’m doing?” Hansa protested.

“Tell them the orc prisoner expired and you’re removing the body.” The orc groaned again in reply. Although this time it was related to their discussion. Hansa ducked out of the tent and returned with the cart. The two struggled to get the body of the sleeping princess, rolled up in the carpet, onto the cart. It was a task complicated by the fact the cart, being on wheels, kept moving. Finally, once the wheels ran into a pile of pillows, they were able to load it with their charge.

The journey out the camp was uneventful. Hansa huffed and sputtered pushing the cart as Cloak led the way. With all the eyes in the area following her, few men even noticed the cart. Once they were out of sight of the sentries, Cloak rushed back to give Hansa a hand pushing the heavy cart. Her timing was perfect. Hansa was almost to the point of collapse and near to dumping their charge on the ground. If he had, getting the carpet back on the cart without the pillows would have been quite the challenge.

The two labored to push the cart over what amounted to little more than a cow path leading back to the palace. Their breathing became strained as the cart rocked back and forth. Dry dust billowed from the wheels and rocks sputtered out from under the iron ringed wheels. The cart’s wheels creaked with the strain as they fell into and out of ruts in the path. It was one of those moments in life where the users of a labor-saving device seemed to be victims of a false premise. They were slowly coming to the realization it might be causing them more effort than it was worth. Something told them, however, there is simply no turning back. This was one of those times, in more ways than one.

The two of them walked only a few feet further before they saw two shimmering shapes in the road before them. Such shapes were common in the desert, where the heat played tricks on the eyes. They were less so under the shade of the trees in the forest. Hansa and Cloak brought the cart to a halt. The two shapes coalesced into a pair of wizards from the Imperial Magnum. They were not going to be happy. The long flowing robes they typically wore were not conducive to being dragged through the forest dirt. Wizards don’t like laundry bills.

The ended up standing before the two; cold and pensive, “I’m afraid we can’t let you continue,” the gray-bearded one explained.

Cloak didn’t bother to try to come up with a ruse. Practitioners of the arts like these two would have seen through any story she might be able to weave. “We are doing this at the emperor’s order.” Cloak protested. “Contact him if you doubt our word.”

“Oh, we are aware.” the other one responded. “But such is not our concern.”

Cloak too was perceptive. Particularly in the case of the thoughts of men. “You hired the Thieves Guild to smuggle her out of the palace.” She glanced at them. “It was you who set her up with the army.”

Hansa tugged on her black cloak. “Should you be telling them all this. Won’t they ...” He pulled his finger across his throat and squeaked. “... if you uncover their plot?”

“I’m afraid it’s too late to hope to evade such consequences now, young man,” Gray Beard explained. “Do continue. I’d like to hear your analysis.” He spoke to Cloak.

“You knew she’d attack the non-human tribes in the wilderness,” Cloak continued her dissertation. “Without the proper experience, you expected her to fail. Then you knew the tribes would march on the capital. Where, once they arrived, you could overthrow the emperor.”

“She could just as well succeed at destroying them. It doesn’t matter.” The second one explained as if lecturing a student. “Her successful command of the army would have led to a civil war. Such an event would have served our purpose as well.”

Cloak narrowed her eyes. “But then you’d have two rulers to depose.”

“Not quite,” explained Gray Beard. “The generals also work for us. The Empire is at peace because of the emperor’s treaties. Peaceful kingdoms rarely provide effective routes for promotion and advancement. Not to mention kingdoms at peace tend to decrease defense spending. Which often impacts the lucrative contracts inherent in procurement operations.”

“Clever,” Cloak retorted.

“We thought so,” the two replied in unison glancing at each other. They were using a knowing look. The one common to those conspiring to complete some nefarious deed. They seemed pleased with themselves, almost as if they were schoolboys passing a test.

“She seems to have successfully uncovered the plot.” Gray Beard looked slightly distressed.

“Not to mention her interfering ways,” The other one mentioned.

“Whatever shall we do, Fiddlesticks.”

Cloak gaped at the two. “Your name is Fiddlesticks?”

Fiddlestick’s face turned red. “It’s just a professional name.” The wizard protested. “Ralph didn’t seem like a worthy name for a wizard of any repute.”

“Fiddlesticks hardly seems better,” Hansa snorted, the young boy desperately tried to keep back his laughter.

Gray Beard appeared to be growing restless. “You almost succeeded,” he mused.

“But you think we haven’t?” commented Cloak as if the question was still in doubt.

Gray Beard seemed pensive. “You almost came off as naïve idiots ... and naïve idiots are no threat to anyone. But I can tell this is not the case.” He started to make a gesture with his hands. The wizards were twisting their fingers into what appeared to be knots. They deftly avoided the resulting inescapable entanglements. The air around them grew to an ionized blue glow.

At the same time, Cloak put her hand on Hansa’s head. There was a bright flash, making it hard to see.

When the light was gone, only Cloak and Hansa remained. “Where did they go?” asked Hansa.

Cloak grinned. “Only the gods know. Perhaps to a cornfield somewhere.”

“Great,” Hansa shouted. “You sent two wizards who can teleport to a cornfield. You know when wizards get mad they tend to kill people slowly. It’s not a pretty sight.”

Cloak blinked. “I think you need to have more faith in the Great Audacious’ spells.”

Why?" Hansa asked disapprovingly, "they've never done much at my command. You'd think if it's my fate to carry around all this mystical energy, they could at least be helpful now and again."

Cloaked cringed. "Stop your bellyaching and help me push this cart."

The cart started up slowly, its wheels creaking as they rolled over the rough ground. The stones again make a crunching sound as the iron-bound wheels turned.

"You can't keep doing it you know?" Hansa explained as they continued to push the cart.

"Doing what?" she protested.

"Using the magic in my head to solve all your problems."

"Why not?"

He gave her an exasperated look. "Because the gods won't like it. Or it'll piss somebody off ... somewhere. Besides, sooner or later my head is going to run out of spells. Who knows how many spells the Great Audacious had in his head when he was killed? Then what?"

Cloak gave the boy a pleasant smile. "We'll deal with running out of spells when it happens. As long as people don't know who you are ... and where spells you're carrying around in your head came from, we should be fine."

Hansa exhaled deeply. "They'll get it wrong you know."

Cloak gave the boy a wry smile. "Who'll get what wrong?"

Hansa looked up at her. "The writers. When they write our saga. Probably dress you in some ridiculous outfit. They'll doubtless describe me as a street urchin."

Cloaked laughed. "You are a street urchin."

"Yea, but they'll get it wrong." Hansa protested.

"They always do," Cloak explained casually, "they always do."