

The Scribe
Eidolon Corps Story 1

by R.A. Paterson

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Rob

"He was tagged by one of the guards on his way into the castle."

Anders nodded, looking down at the image of the man on the scrying mirror. The man in question was just entering his twenties, mouse brown hair, slight stoop, clothes just a bit sloppy and ill-fitting- typical scribe. He didn't look like much of a fighter, either, and hardly like an assassin- which was reasonable since he was supposed to be neither of those things.

"Do we know what he's been infected with?" Anders asked, not taking his eyes off the man, who was simply sitting at a desk arranging papers.

"We got Kulhaven to do an analysis," Lord Bringham answered. "He's been hit with a Class 4 delayed action Mind Control spell- Hathiri in origin. We've got intelligence running it down, but I expect it'll come up as one of the standard types." Then Anders's boss, the director of Imperial Intelligence , stroked his long red beard. "Good bit of luck, that. If they'd used one of the more recent spells with a cloaking weave, the guard's mage sight might not even have caught it."

"Yes. Good bit of luck." Anders repeated, sounding more thoughtful than certain. "So, who at the peace conference are we to assume is the target?"

"Kiri?" Lord Bringham looked over at one of the other people who stood around the table in which the scrying mirror was embedded. A striking ebon-haired woman with pale skin and eyes such a bright blue that they glowed with a soft luminescence in the darkened room.

"Tomorrow's peace conference between the Cutwater Rebels and the Empire will be attended by sixteen delegates- eight from each side, plus their scribes and personal attendants. The most likely targets are the heads of the rebel army, Earla Brightblade and Sturm Gallan, or the Minister of the Left, Lord Rathcombe. The deaths of any of these people would result in the dissolution of the conference, and the continuation of the war.

"It is possible others might be the targets, but since we assume that the goal of the assassination attempt is the continuation of hostilities, they will be the most likely choices. In addition to

this, Lucas Biddleton, the scribe in question, is slated to sit to Lord Rathcombe's left. Killing the Lord from that position will be relatively easy, assuming he's also got some form of weapon smuggled in with him."

"The pen will be enough," Anders commented, tapping the side of his throat. "If he hits the right spot. There will likely be poison in the ink as well, or some sort of enchantment to make sure the job is done properly. Assuming the Lord is the target, and assuming that Biddleton is carrying the weapon and not having it delivered." Then he looked at his boss. "How are we going to handle this, sir?"

The aging warrior glanced around the table at the eight assembled members of the Imperial Eidolon Corps, "For the time being, we've just had Biddleton put under surveillance. Our goal isn't to stop the assassination, that's the job of the security detail on the conference. Our goal is to learn who's behind this and gather enough evidence to make sure they're dealt with."

"Understood." Anders replied, turning to look at his team. "Alright people, listen up. Since time is critical, we're going to split into four. Vulfang and Jorah, you're going to do a background check on the scribe. Interview family, friends, neighbors and anyone else you can. Kiri, you and Kulhaven need to continue your covert analysis of that spell someone's put on him. We need to know what the trigger is, and anything else you can get from it. Black, you and Ding need to check the rest of the attendees to the best of your ability, also check the rooms where the conference will be taking place. You're looking for any method by which something could be passed to Biddleton during the conference."

Then the thirty-something man with the shaggy brown hair looked at the remaining member of his team, a tall, blonde woman with broad shoulders and a steely gaze. "Courtney, you're with me. Everyone else, keep in touch."

This got a round of affirmations, and the team went into action as Anders and his partner walked from the table, heading for the nearest door. Anders pulling on a gray longcoat and tanned fingerless gloves as they went.

"Captain, where are we going?" Courtney asked, striding along beside him.

"To interview the attendees."

"But, you just assigned Black and Ding to deal with them?"

"No, I assigned Black and Ding to check them, not talk with them. That will be our job."

"Oh. I see." Courtney nodded. "Who will we begin with, then?"

Anders smiled. "When faced with a choice between two evils, trainee, always pick the one you haven't tried yet."

#

"When we go in," Anders told his partner while they were waiting. "Note everything."

Courtney nodded, and at a mental command let the faceplate of the armor she wore slipped over her eyes. As it did, the world suddenly shifted to the view through mage-sight. Now the world was patterns of energy weaving in and around everything, blue and green for inert natural energies, and brighter yellows and oranges and reds for energy which had been twisted and woven into constructs.

Instead of seeing Anders in the black-piped crimson of the Imperial Security service, with his long face and shaggy brown hair, she instead saw a vaguely man-shaped fuzzy yellow blob. His protective magics and anti-scrying spells preventing her senses from penetrating more deeply into his true nature. Similarly, when she looked down at herself she saw the magical Armor of Saltea that she always wore, but which was normally invisible and intangible around her body. A second skin of full armor that existed in astral space and only manifested to aid her or protect her. To anyone else, she too would appear to be wearing the normal security service uniform.

A quick check of the front sitting room of the mansion they were visiting revealed a number of spells for monitoring and listening in, as well as several dormant security traps for the unwary thief. These were all relatively minor weaves, not meant to deal with someone whose magics were stronger than you could find in the marketplace. This was merely a wealthy merchant's

home in a frontier city, after all, not a place of espionage and covert operations. Although with the leader of one of the rebel armies here, she did think it poor that the host hadn't beefed up security a little.

At last, a servant appeared and gestured them into the audience room, where behind a large antique desk with gold inlays sat the rebel leader, Earla Brightblade. She was older than Courtney expected, with salt and pepper hair and deep lines in her leathery face, but the young woman could also see how Earla may have once been a striking figure. Not that she wasn't impressive now, with her bright purple silks and blue sash, but what immediately drew Courtney's eyes were Earla's own- she didn't have any.

In place of eyes, Earla Brightblade had two clear glass spheres, and in the middle of each hung a red gem shining like a miniature star. Orbs of Truth, Courtney thought as the General rose to greet them and offered a hand. They were rare, even rarer than the armor Courtney herself wore, and she had only heard of them, never seen a pair. Even though this woman was the enemy, it raised her quite a bit in Courtney's estimation. To have your eyes ripped out and replaced with these artifacts took a lot of courage, even if they allowed her to see "the truth of the world"- whatever that meant.

"Welcome, friends." Earla smiled, motioning them to the seats arrayed before the desk. "May I offer you tea? Or fruit? The merchant whose home I stay in specializes in fruits from the Southern jungles, so do feel welcome to ask for whatever you may wish."

Anders sat, declining the offer. "No. No. Thank you, General Brightblade. We don't wish to impose on your host's profits, nor do we plan to take up much of your time."

"Of course," the older woman slipped back behind the desk. "But you will not be offended if I partake? I have been working so hard I seem to have missed a meal or two. Haman, could you see to it?"

The tall, gruff looking man in the white clothes of a desert warrior who stood beside the general's desk nodded. "Of course, General." Then he marched back out the way the pair had come.

"Colonel Haman of the Slate," Earla said once they were alone. "My chief of security, and the head of my house guard. I saved his life during the Red Gorge incident, and he has been with me ever since. If you are here to discuss changes in security arrangements for the conference tomorrow, he would know them better than I would."

"We are, but I think General, that you are the one who can better answer our questions."

"Oh?"

"Yes, we're here assessing possible assassination threats to yourself or others at the conference."

Earla smiled again. "If you want a list of people who may wish me dead, it will not be a short one. It's been a long war, and peace isn't quite as popular as you might think."

"I would think peace is always welcome," Anders offered. "Just so long as one benefits from it."

"Are you looking for those who don't?"

"I'm a practical man," Anders agreed. "I find simple motives the most compelling."

The General frowned, her affected mirth draining away. "That too is a fair list, but I believe I may shorten it quickly enough. I will have my secretary give you a few names before you go."

"Thank you, it would be appreciated." Anders replied as Colonel Haman returned with a pair of servants carrying food and drink. "Is there a name I should pay special attention to?"

Earla thought a moment. "Tyla Bonheur is where I would begin." She offered.

"Then I will start there," said Anders with a curt nod, and he stood up so fast Courtney had to jump to her feet to keep up with him. "Thank you for your time, General Brightblade." He placed a hand across his chest and bowed slightly. "I wish you success in your negotiations tomorrow."

The rebel general mimicked the gesture, wished them well, and then pair made their exit.

Courtney didn't speak until after they'd retrieved the list from the general's secretary and left the building. Anders hadn't said a word, so she thought she too should remain silent. Despite this, she felt as if she was going to burst if she wasn't able to ask questions, and did so as soon as they were in the private safety of their carriage.

"Do you think she's involved?" She asked her superior.

"I think everyone's involved, trainee." Anders told her with a slight hint of amusement. "Don't you?"

The younger woman wasn't sure how to answer this, and hesitated before finally replying- "I think she's the one we're after."

"Why? Let me hear your reasoning."

"It's those Orbs of Truth- there's no way anyone could get close to her without her seeing their intent. She'd also see any delayed spells, so it'd be useless to put ensorcelled people around her unless she already knew about them."

Anders nodded. "A reasonable assumption. Nothing provable, but reasonable."

"So what can we do, sir? Put her under surveillance?"

"Even if she is responsible," Anders said, pulling a small circle of leather from the folds of his longcoat. "She won't leave any direct connections with whoever is conducting this operation." Then he undid a small hook and flipped open the leather circle to reveal a tiny scrying mirror the size of an egg.

"Hebris," he said, using the mirror's activation codeword. Almost immediately, the bespeckled face of a young male clerk appeared in the mirror.

"Hawkins," said the clerk.

"Give me a connection to the chief, Hawkins."

"One moment, please, sir." Said the man, and in Anders' mirror Courtney could see the receiving mirror being lined up with another mirror of the same size which had the image of Lord Brigham on it.

"What have you got, Anders?" The Lord asked, when the two mirrors were aligned with each other.

Anders told him what they'd learned so far, including Courtney's thoughts.

"Spell analysis on the scribe is still ongoing, we're trying to avoid bringing him in unless we need to, as we don't want to tip the opposition off." The lord told them. "I have an appointment with the Minister of the Left in an hour. Black and Ding are currently en-route to Sturm Gallen's residence. I'm going to have them do the interview with him."

Anders frowned. "I was going to do that myself, sir. Is there a reason?"

"Jorah and Vulfang have turned up a missing piece of time in the scribe's itinerary, and I want you to focus on that. It seems a more likely line of investigation."

#

The city of Kul-Margat was an ancient trade city which sat on the Western border of the Empire, where the last of the mountains of the South met the vast expanse of the Kahli Desert. Carved, as much as built, from the deep brown stone of a mountain, it was home to thousands, and at any time had thousands more passing through its gates. Trade was the city's reason for being, and most of its narrow, twisting streets were dedicated to the shops that seemed attached to the first level of every house.

Courtney and Anders met Vulfang and Jorah in an outdoor cafe on one of the lower levels frequented by travelers. Courtney spotted the two men almost immediately, the hulking Vulfang with his scarred face and the more fashionable Jorah with his slicked-back black hair being easy to spot in a tent filled with desert tribesmen. Both were dressed in civilian clothes, as were Courtney and Anders now, their uniforms traded in for pale cloth robes and colorful scarves.

"Yo! Friends!" Vulfang raised a glass of the local brew to them as she and Anders threaded their way through the tables of tea-drinkers. Courtney tried not to look at the other things arrayed on the tables, not wanting to lose her lunch.

"Vulfang. Jorah." Anders said as they took their seats.

"How's he treating you, new girl?" Vulfang asked Courtney.

She shrugged. "Well enough."

Vulfang laughed. "Then you're getting off luckier than that last recruit...What was his name?"

"Tomkins," Anders said, clearly not eager to discuss the subject.

But Vulfang ignored him. "Yeah, Tomkins. Anders here had him begging for a transfer after the first week. He must like you."

"I believe," Jorah put in. "That it's because you share a commonality. Like you, Courtney, Anders is an alumni of the Ferring School in the Capitol. Did he tell you that?"

In point of fact, Anders had talked little to Courtney since she'd joined the unit two weeks before, and even today had said almost nothing outside of the topic at hand. She was surprised to find out that he was a Ferring graduate, though. It was a school for the children of high ranking officials, and she'd pegged Anders as a scholar's son.

"I wasn't aware." Courtney said, trying to avoid looking at Anders. "He doesn't talk much."

The others laughed. "Enjoy it while you can," Vulfang finally said. "Once he gets used to you, he won't shut up!"

"What have you learned?" Anders said, trying to steer the conversation back to the mission at hand. "Anything more about the missing hours?"

Vulfang turned to Jorah, who nodded. "Indeed. We were able to determine from a servant at the governor's house that he asked directions to a bookstore here on the gate level. It seems someone had told him where he could find a book on medicinal desert flowers, and he went in search of it."

"Do we know who that someone was?" Anders asked.

Jorah shook his head. "No one knew, but he reappeared several hours later, and it was the next day that he was spotted. He had just come in the day before with the Minister of

the Left's party, so this seems the most likely time."

"Agreed. We'll check it out. Let's go."

As the four of them left the tent, following Jorah, Courtney leaned in and asked Anders "Sir, what year did you graduate? I don't remember seeing you there."

Anders' jaw tightened. "I didn't graduate." He half-growled, keeping his eyes straight ahead.

Courtney decided she'd best do the same, and let the subject lie.

#

They found the book store wedged in between a flower shop and boarded-up home on a bustling market street- the blue icon of a book barely visible on the sandblasted sign that hung above the front doorway. Courtney and Anders went inside first, with Vulfang and Jorah loitering nearby and pretending interest in a local carpet seller's wares.

The old bookseller, standing behind a short counter to their right as they entered, smiled at them warmly. "Friends! Welcome to my humble shop." He said through bad teeth as he looked at them expectantly. "How may I help you?"

The shop was a long and thin room filled to the brim with leather bound books, scrolls and various piles of vellum that filled it with a musty scent that Courtney associated with teacher's offices and her own father's study. At the back, a single small staircase twisted up into the dwelling above.

"I was recommended a book by a friend, and told you had a copy." Anders said casually, giving a brief description of Biddleton the scribe. "He told me I could find a book on medicinal wildflowers here."

Hearing this, the bookseller frowned. "No. No book on that here." He said, his face becoming serious. "The man you seek didn't come here." He added, and then began to fiddle around behind the counter, agitated.

"Are you sure?" Said Anders, watching him intently.

"Quite sure," said the seller without looking at them, then he picked up a book from behind the desk and began walking toward the front window to place it with the others on display. "You may look for it here, but you will not find the book you're looking for."

Inwardly, Courtney shook her head. This clearly wasn't going to be much of a lead, and she was about to ask Anders what to do next when suddenly Anders yelled "stop him!" and leapt over the counter. Shocked, Courtney tried to run around the counter, but by the time she'd gotten around it Anders had already thrown the old bookseller to the ground.

Whipping out a small strip of paper from his pockets, Anders slapped it on the struggling man's forehead, at which point the struggling seller suddenly went limp like a broken puppet. "Here," Anders said, thrusting the book the man had been carrying into Courtney's hands, then he whipped out a scrying mirror.

Courtney looked at the book, "A Study of the Grey Fawn-Mouse" it was called, but a quick check with mage-sight revealed nothing unusual about it, it was a normal book, with the only exceptional thing about it being a rather nice rendering of a fawn-mouse on its grass green cover.

Moments later, Vulfang and Jorah slipped inside the front curtain.

"Check upstairs, watch for traps." Anders ordered, and the two men rushed past and up the spiral staircase at the back.

"Sir, this book..?" Said Courtney, now somewhat confused.

Anders, who was now rooting around through the seller's pockets, didn't bother to look up, but began to explain. "Courtney, what color are the books in the front window?"

This caught the young woman by surprise, she hadn't really thought about it. "I don't know", she admitted. "Should I go look?"

She caught Anders rolling his eyes and decided to stay where she was.

"Brown," Anders told her. "Most decidedly brown. All of them."

"Sir?"

Finishing with the seller and not finding anything, Anders shifted his attention to the rear of the counter. "Why place a bright green book among a collection of brown ones in a front window?"

That's when it hit her.

"A signal, he was sending a signal."

Anders nodded. "Somewhat late, but at least you finally arrived at the proper conclusion. Didn't you notice how his manner changed when I mentioned the scribe? He clearly wanted us gone, and there had to be a reason for it."

Finishing his search without finding anything, Anders stood up. "No scrying mirrors, or other means of signaling. So you're holding the one we want."

Courtney looked down at the book again, impressed. She never would have thought of that.

"Anders, upstairs!" Jorah called down.

"Cover the door, but don't let them see you do it." Anders ordered, gesturing at the wooden boards that lay next to the entrance.

When she'd done as he ordered, Courtney checked the bookseller to be sure he was still out. A large black and purple blotch was starting to form on his temple where he'd hit his head when Anders had thrown him down, but the sleep talisman Anders had used was firmly stuck to his forehead. He wouldn't awaken until someone removed it.

Then Courtney slipped up the narrow stairs and into the upper level. The place was a messier version of the store below, with cushions for sitting and clothes strewn about. She followed the sounds of her comrade's voices into another room, and through a hole which had been knocked in a side-wall. Next to the hole, a hanging carpet lay crumpled on the floor- the hole's former covering.

Inside what Courtney took to be the abandoned building next door, she found her comrades standing around the edges of a large, empty room. The only illumination was from a half-covered

rear window, but it revealed nothing but an empty room, the middle of which Anders and the others were peering at carefully.

She was almost going to ask why, but suddenly she stopped herself and did the obvious thing- she switched to mage-sight.

The moment she did, it literally all became clear.

The room which looked so darkened and dusty under normal sight was actually ablaze with lines of yellow and orange magic everywhere. The majority of it was concentrated around a circle in the middle of the room about the diameter of a wagon wheel, which was what Anders and the others were examining. Moving closer, Courtney could see the very tight weaves of the circle's structure, and recognized the sharp angles of Hathiri style weaves.

"A casting circle for a mind control spell." Jorah said, before she could ask for confirmation. "This is where they did Biddleton."

Anders nodded. "Vulfang, take Courtney up on the roof and do a survey of the marketplace. Find out who was supposed to catch that signal. Jorah, I need to know how many times this thing has been used. Can you do that?"

"I can try," said the gentleman, slipping down into a crosslegged position next to the casting circle.

Vulfang clapped Courtney on the shoulder. "Let's go, kid."

Following the large man up a ladder at the back of the building, the two agents crept low across the roof, before they reached the edge, Vulfang stopped her. He pulled a hood up to hide his broad, shaved head that was gleaming in the midday sun, and motioned for her to do the same.

Instead, Courtney shook her head. A moment's concentration later, she vanished from sight, her Armor of Saltea throwing a stealth weave over her whole body. If she moved there was a visible distortion, but as long as she was still she was effectively invisible.

Now Vulfang was the one to be impressed. "Must be nice." He said, shaking his head, then the two of them dropped to their elbows and crept forward to the front edge of the building.

"Look for anyone showing a lot of interest in the building," he told her. "After seeing all of us go in, they should be getting pretty antsy about now."

Courtney started to indicate she would, then remembered that he couldn't see her, and just settled down to work. There were a lot of people on the market street, but all seemed to be busy going about their business and showing little interest in anything to do with the bookstore. She started checking the other buildings as well, and while there were many open windows, almost none were occupied.

After a few minutes, Vulfang whispered "Check the bun seller."

It took her a moment to find him, but sure enough, partway down the street was a bun seller's stall, and she saw the turbaned head of a skinny man pop out from behind the edge of the stall and look at the store beneath them. As they watched, he casually walked out and past the store, pausing to try to get a look inside the window of the bookshop, and then continued in a look back to his own stall.

"Not very professional, is he?"

Vulfang smiled at her comment. "He's just a little extra hired help. You keep watch, I'll report this in."

A few minutes later, he was creeping back up beside her again.

"You can leap around, right?"

"Yes," Courtney said. "Like a rabbit."

"Good. Here's the plan- Anders is going to put the book in the window, and we're going to see what he does. If he runs, you follow. If he sneaks off to use a mirror, we grab him."

It made sense, and Courtney said as much.

So they lay there on the hot roof and waited. This is where her armor had a decidedly large disadvantage, Courtney decided. While the stealth weave was active, her armor was manifest around her in the physical world, but it had no system for cooling, and literally became a wrapper she was stuffed inside. It didn't physically get hot, but it did keep her from cooling

and so she suffered from a real chance of overheating if she exerted herself in the armor or was in a hot environment with it on for too long.

She wanted to pull back and release the armor, giving herself a chance to breath, but it could be needed at any moment, and she didn't want to look weak in front of Vulfang. So instead she lay there, getting ever more uncomfortable in the midday sun.

Then, just as she was about to retreat and escape from her personal prison because she couldn't stand it anymore- something happened.

Using mage-sight, she could look through physical barriers and see the pale green and yellow silhouettes of people. Behind the bun-seller stand she watched as he summoned a boy, gave the child something, and then sent the boy running down the street.

"You're up. Keep in touch." Vulfang told her, and Courtney pulled back from the edge, stood up, and began running across the rooftops in pursuit of the boy. The buildings that didn't share a wall had only small alleys between them because of the dense need for space, so it didn't take much for her to keep up with the boy.

She used mage-sight to track him as he sprinted among the awnings and between the sellers and their stalls until he ducked into a restaurant two blocks away. It also let her follow his progress as he made his way through the crowded tables to finally stop next to a man, give him something, and then leave.

Ignoring the boy now, she crouched on a rooftop across the street and waited.

After a few minutes, the man casually got up and walked to the back of the restaurant and out a rear doorway.

Sighing, Courtney took a look down at the market street below, did a quick estimate, and decided her odds. Then she took a couple steps back, and with a running start threw herself into the air over the street. Thanks to the magical enhancements of her armor, she soared over the sellers and bystanders to land with a hard crunch on the restaurant roof with room to spare.

Not having time to be be impressed with herself, she dashed forward to the back edge of the roof and looked down.

The man was alone in the back alley, and was unrolling a piece of paper on top of a wooden barrel. As she watched, he pulled out something and started to write quickly on the paper, scrawling down a message. The paper shone with a light orange tint, so Courtney wasn't surprised at all with what happened when the man was done.

He pulled out a knife, cut the tip of his finger and dropped a little blood on the corner of the page. Instantly the paper came to brilliant orange life as the blood activated the spell and the paper was transformed into the shape of a messenger bird about the size and shape of a pigeon.

This was her time to act, and Courtney took it.

Vaulting over the edge, she dropped down from above and grabbed the bird, then, before the man could react to the invisible demon he faced, she backhanded him into the wall, rendering him unconscious in a cloud of yellow alley dirt.

"In you go," she said to the bird as she grabbed the sack the man had been carrying and stuffed the magical messenger inside.

#

"I've brought presents."

Anders gestured for Vulfang to take the man from Courtney, and accepted the bag with a raised eyebrow.

"Messenger bird," she explained, looking about the room in the abandoned building they'd found the magic circle in. Jorah was still sitting next to the circle, deep in meditation.

"You didn't dispel it?" Her superior asked.

"I didn't want to risk damaging the message in case there was a special code word." Courtney answered, not sure from his manner if he was pleased or annoyed.

She got her answer when his lips curled a bit on the edge, and he nodded in approval. "You show promise." He said,

thrusting his hand into the bag and pulling out the flapping and struggling black messenger spell. It looked like a shadow that had gained a third dimension.

"Thank you, sir."

Holding it by the back of the neck, Anders examined it for a moment, and Courtney saw his eyes glow yellow. Then he reached into his coat and produced another long yellow paper talisman, sticking one end in his teeth while he began to twist it with his free hand.

"Any luck with the circle?" Courtney asked Vulfang.

"Jorah says they've used it more than once," said the agent, tapping a sleep talisman onto the unconscious man's forehead to keep him that way. "He's still trying to determine how many times, and what orders the victims were given."

"I see..." Courtney looked at the circle thoughtfully, wondering how the victims felt. Did they know their own minds had been stripped away from them?

"You okay?" Vulfang asked her as he walked over. "You look like hell."

"Yeah, I'll be okay." She lied. "It's hot out there."

In point of fact, Courtney had almost passed out on the return trip, and been forced to rest in the shade of a rooftop awning before continuing back. The heat exhaustion had left her pale and a little shaky, but again, she didn't want to show weakness in front of her new superiors.

Vulfang reached behind his back and produced a thick green plant stem from one of his belt pouches, offering it to her. It looked slightly rotten and smelled it as well.

"Chew on this a while. It's high desert cactus."

"I really don't..." She started to refuse, but saw the serious look in his eye and finally took it from him. "Do I have to?"

"If you want to stay standing."

"Right," she stared at the root a moment, and then popped it into her mouth and started to chew. Surprisingly, it didn't

taste so bad at all. In fact, it tasted somewhat like a very juicy licorice.

She looked at Vulfang in surprise, and the large man winked at her. "Not too bad, right? You'll be right as rain in a few."

"Good, because she needs to go back out again."

They both looked at Anders, who was looping the now ropelike talisman around the bird's neck. He tied it off at the end, and said a few whispered words- the talisman melted into the bird's shadowy form.

"I've put a tracker in it," he explained. "It'll leave a trail that can only be seen with mage-sight, and you'll follow it to its destination."

"Okay," Courtney agreed. "Let's go..." Then a wave of dizziness washed over her, and she had to steady herself. "...In a minute."

"Take ten," Anders said, holding up the bird. "I need you both to get there intact."

#

Arthos Manning was watering his plants when the bird arrived- fluttering in through his window to land on a nearby chair-back.

Frowning, Manning waddled over to where the bird sat and held out an open hand. Obligingly, the bird leapt onto it, and with a whispered word from Manning the bird was replaced by a rolled-up paper scroll. He wasn't expecting a message today, he considered as he unrolled the paper- who could this be from?

His first indication was the size and poor penmanship of the words, and then when he read it his eyes went wide with panic. How had they been discovered? This was terrible!

Rushing over to a nearby desk, the plump middle-aged man ripped the desk drawer right out in his haste- its contents cascading down onto the tile floor. Uncaring, he thrust a hand into the hole left by the drawer and produced a leather circle which had been hidden inside.

Ripping free the cover, he gave a code-word and the mirror instantly began to glow.

A moment later, a face appeared on the mirror.

"What is it?" Growled Colonel Haman of the Slate.

But however hard Arthos Manning tried to reply, the words would not come out. It was as if his whole body was frozen- for that was exactly what the paralysis talisman that had been stuck to the back of his head had done.

"Manning?!? Manning!!" The Colonel yelled, but to no avail.

Slipping the cover back on the scrying mirror, Courtney smiled.

"Don't worry Colonel, you'll see your friend here soon enough."

#

"This isn't right."

From the top of the temple steps, Courtney and Anders watched as a line of delegates filed past security and into the Temple of the Golden Host for the peace conference between the Empire and the Rebel Army. Earla Brightblade at the lead, minus her chief of security, walked up the steps to meet the Minister of the Left, who bowed and led her inside.

"You'd best get accustomed to it, this is politics." Anders told her from where he leaned with his back against one of the towering marble pillars. "This conference is more important than your notions of justice."

"Is that why you brought me here to see this?" She fixed him with her slate-blue eyes, and he met hers evenly with his brown.

"It is."

She was the one who turned away, disgusted.

They had captured Colonel Haman quickly enough before he'd escaped, and under interrogation he'd confirmed what they'd learned from the spell circle they'd found next to the bookstore. Two scribes, a cook, a servant and two guards had been put under their control, all of them targeting different people. It was a timed operation, with some acting as a distraction while the others would strike. All very carefully

planned to bring an abrupt end to the conference, and all apparently done under his single authority.

"There's no way she isn't behind this," Courtney spat. "With those eyes of hers, she could see them coming as clear as day."

"You're saying despite the assassin targeted at her, she was in no danger?"

"Yes."

"And you'd be right." He agreed. "The target was most likely her co-leader, Sturm Gallan, as she'd have to share anything she gains from the negotiations with him. Perhaps he has something she wants hidden, or knows something... Well, regardless, we have no proof, and without proof, only the Colonel will take responsibility. At least, until she negotiates his freedom as part of the treaty."

"What?!?" Courtney looked at him, aghast. "We'll let him go? After what he did?"

"Someone once said that politics is the art of compromise. One life to save thousands, isn't it worth the cost?"

Courtney looked down, considering.

"I still don't like it."

"And you're not required to," he shrugged. "Just to follow orders, even when they don't agree with your ideals. Can you do that?"

With only the briefest moment of hesitation, she nodded.

"I can."

He studied her for a time, then seemed to come to a conclusion.

"I believe you. Welcome to the team."

"Thank you," she said. Suddenly not feeling all that happy about getting what she'd wanted.

"Oh, cheer up." He clapped her on the shoulder. "It's not as if he'll get away completely free."

She looked up at him, puzzled. "What do you mean?"

Anders gave an evil grin. "As part of our investigation I believe we should test that spell circle before we erase it, with a few modifications, of course. I think the Colonel will make a nice volunteer." He winked. "She can decide if she wants to keep the Colonel around after that, never knowing what orders we gave him."

Courtney laughed. It wasn't justice, but it was close enough for today.

FIN

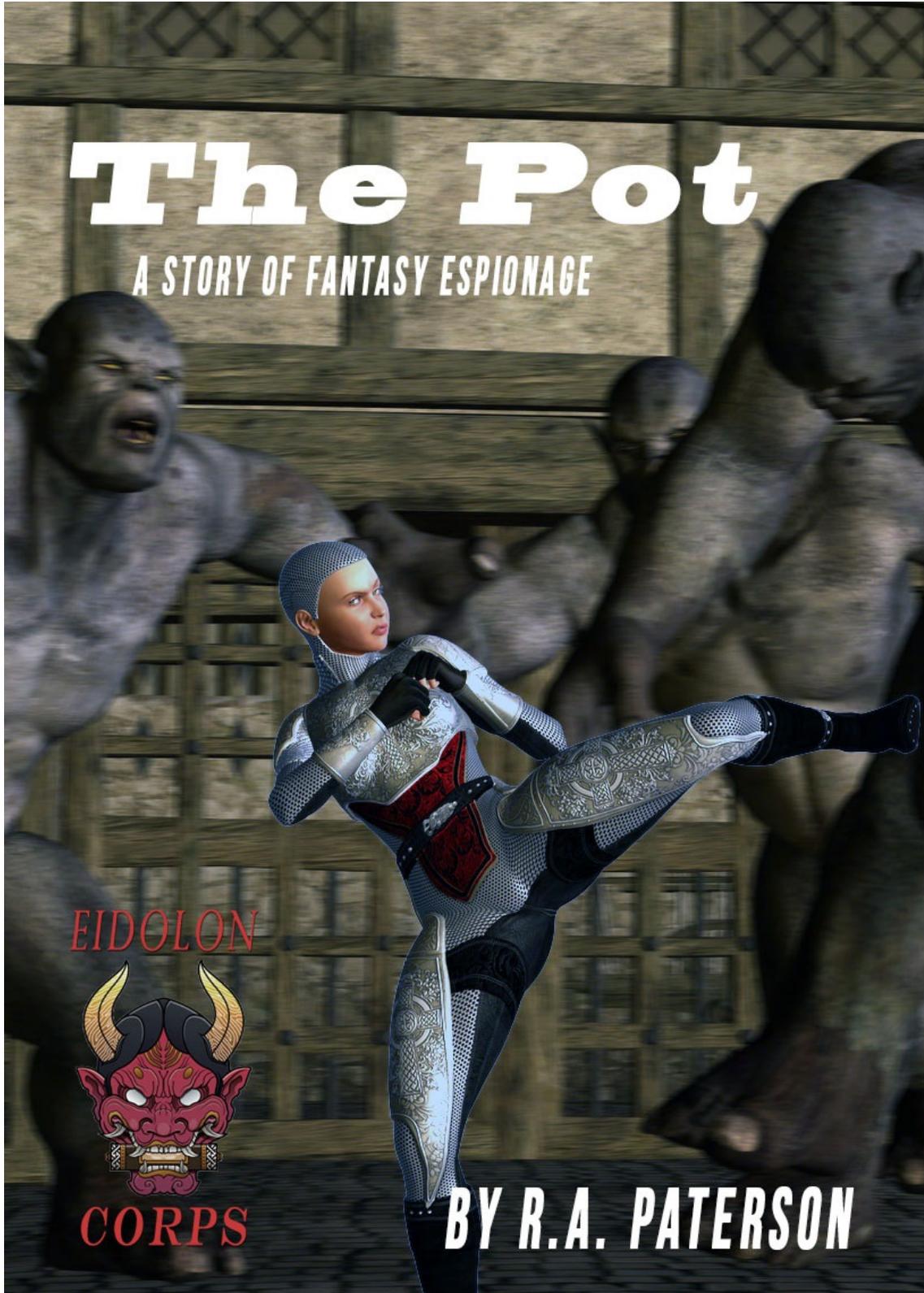
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