

BETRAYER

The Scourge of Trabonus



Citadel 7 Novella 2

YUAN JUR

Citadel 7 Series

Betrayer

Scourge of Trabonus

**A threat to all Existence looms.
Two Wardens remain, but it's their mysterious apprentice
who holds the key to survival.**

Novella 3

Yuan Jur

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, businesses, places, events and incidents are either the products of the author's imagination or used in a fictitious manner. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, or actual events is purely coincidental.

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Cover and art design by Ralph Hawke Manis of Infinitee Designs © 2017 www.infinitee-designs.com

Book design and production by WaaDoom Press in association with Thebookpatch.com

Editing and structure by Charles Wannop and De Chao Peterson

ISBN-978-0-9942153-1-4

Publisher - WaaDoom

Dedication

Many thanks to--The Citadel 7 series Crew; Editors John David Kudrick & Mary Rosenblum, compilation and type setting, Charles Wannop - the many proof readers and the beta test group who help the Citadel 7 series reach for the high bar.

"Welcome Agent. This mission propels us along the Superverse continuum through the endless oceans of Dark Matter. We will emerge in a timeline where some things will seem familiar, others quite strange. The voice of *Central* will now take you through our brief. See you on the ground. Mission success to us all!"

C-DATE: CLASSIFIED.

UNFOLDING TIMELINE: ACTIVE.

REGION OF CONTACT: CELESTIAL ENDLESS ZONE.

ERA: POST SECOND CITADEL WAR.

CLASSIFIED PLANET SECURITY LEVEL: 10.

IDENTIFICATION: T ... T ... TORA.

ERROR!

SYSTEM HIJACKED!

REROUTING--STAND BY.

"Human Agent, are you there? Naught's beard! This better work. Gods damn this Jenaoin technology. Ehhh ... What does this one do? Where is a competent servant when you need one? Ah, this should do it.

"Agent, my name is Evercycle Three. My designation is 'Lord of Chaos.' I don't have much time before Central identifies my signal and severs this hijack. Yes yes, I know it *looks* like a page in a book to you, but it's much more. Just shut up and read. What I'm about to tell you will keep you safe--will give you *and* freedom a chance. A great miscarriage of justice has occurred. My son, Herrex, Lord of

Balance, has been wrongly imprisoned on the world of Tora.

"They are sending you to Tora now to make certain you are misled. It is part of a greater plan for dominating existence. Herrex is blamed for a great many things. Not all are his doing. It was a misdemeanor or two ... nothing more than some insignificant worlds repurposed, I assure you. Yes, he is impetuous at times and difficult to reason with. But the true deceiver--and a great danger to us all--is working behind the scenes. So my son is angry, Agent, and looking for escape. He feels betrayed by everyone and intends revenge.

"A huge cover-up is underway. Those who wear the halo of good are not all they seem. The existence of many is at stake. Even though you are not aligned to my house, I beg you to be just in your verdict. What you decide may carry the day. Not unlike your Earth, Tora has great landmasses and diverse races ... even technology, of a kind. Its planetary mass was created at the same time as your world, only in another dimension. Both worlds, though, were brought into being for the same cursed reason. Did they explain any of this to you?

"Anyway, just don't believe what you hear of my Herrex from your, uh ... allies. It's all lies. See for yourself, and I'll let you decide. Change had to come to put things right; that's all Herrex was trying to do. A few thousand worlds were lost, but that was unavoidable. He didn't mean it. His actions were just ... misunderstood. Your race has more in common with my Herrex than you know, Agent. One way or another, we are now all integral to this one vast multiverse.

"Your transition to Tora is at hand. Be careful when your feet touch ground. Tora is a level-ten security world--a place where none get in or out without approval scans and special permission. Only those wardens of the House of Zero are exempt. They may come to check on Herrex as they need, but no one else. Well ... there is one other possible exception, and his sympathies lie with me. Otherwise Tora is off the grid from the discoverable time-space Continuum for now. Herrex may have been excessive in some of his actions, but he didn't deserve this.

"The balance of power in Superverse evolution has to change. I have plans in place to see that this occurs, and soon. As you descend, look directly below and

Betrayer

you will see there breathes the Flaxon city of Weirawind. Amidst its soft, flickering lamp lights and burning street braziers, buildings huddle together like tidy, fortified mounds of brick and wood. The citizens living along its stone-paved streets aspire to many things, as simple mortals go. They are steered by a blind church belief in only one god, and governed by a dynasty of ruthless despots looking for the next best power play. You need to know that they are militant toward any race not under their thumb. Your Earth history has had its share of despots too, hasn't it? Earth's Napoleonic period would compare well to the culture and ruling class of Flaxor, only their leader is one Regent Trabonus. They have a cunning written and spoken language. They also have a disciplined military on foot and horseback.

"I urge you to start your journey by observing the actions of the Flaxon ruler. Trust no one, Agent. Nothing is as it seems."

CHAPTER

1

Schemes Aplenty

Regent Trabonus looked out on Weirawind City's southern aspect from his recently refurbished War Room. In deep thought the lord and master of Flaxor stared at the storming night skies through open shutters from the third story. Slanting sheets of rain still pelted down from the day before, chilled by the eastbound winds of leaf-fall. Slate-gray clouds bristled with an electric light show from within, echoing the present situation needling the regent's mind.

Holding the broad lapels of his favorite black gambeson, Trabonus watched a flash of lightning strike the ground in the forest far to the south. The dull glow of the subsequent fire died quickly in the persistent downpour. Trabonus contemplated the recent strife between his brother, Magistrate Waldon the Elder, and himself, even as servants milled about behind him in silence. The regent scratched the stubble of his ongoing but futile attempt to grow a beard, and then he sighed.

So there is little choice in the matter. How will I handle this?

To his left, at the servery on the far side of the war table, his butler set down a tray. On it was hot char, a carafe of wine, and some light supper for those soon to

Betrayer

arrive.

The pleasant peppery smell of burning needle bush and stendle wood stimulated Trabonus's rather bulbous, hairy nose. He flared his nostrils, considering with some annoyance the tiny flaws in the new textiles and floor coverings recently installed in the refurbishment.

Perhaps an afternoon of energetic flogging would help me think clearer. There must be more transgressors the jailer could round up.

His focus returned to his new surroundings. The rug makers had delivered the new wall hangings and patterned floor coverings only that afternoon. The new stitch work on the tapestries from the master weaver looked tolerable this time, Trabonus had told them on inspection.

I think I'll order an extra barrel of mead for the master weaver. And perhaps order that the rug makers are given leisure for half a day this moon too. My benevolence knows no bounds. Hmm ... definitely warmer in here now since I had the flue remade.

"You there," Trabonus called to a passing servant. "See another solid piece goes on the fire before we begin."

"As you wish, my lord."

The subject matter--and resulting mood--will bring a chill of its own, I've no doubt.

Now seeing his thirty-eighth season of leaf-fall, Trabonus mused that much had transpired since his father's untimely passing and his own succession to the regency. It was something that had taken the military junta by surprise, since Trabonus's older brother, Waldon, had been next in line. Yet it had been Waldon himself who made the announcement, though many who knew him well saw and heard the indignation in his delivery. It had also been common knowledge that Waldon was the favorite of their father, Straxus II. Trabonus had arrived into the world almost killing his mother at birth. Lady Morgania nonetheless declared him the miracle Flaxor was destined to have. As a child and teenager, the young Trabonus quickly earned the whispered name of "Little Mr. Never Wrong" amongst castle staff. "No" was the most uncommon word that Trabonus heard

whilst his father was out of eye and ear shot. His mother forgave his every transgression, of which there were a multitude, and punished severely any who would bar his way. Morgania's flagrant disregard for her husband's directive--to discipline their younger son in his absence--was always met with forceful consequences upon his return. Thus Trabonus hated his father, and at the banquet of his Coming of Age--in a supposed drunken stupor--he openly vowed to return the favor.

Some moons later, while Trabonus was away being educated in trade and commerce, his father, mother, and brother went on a private hunt. Castle staff later heard from one of the hunting party's chasers that Lady Morgania's mount missed a jump and threw her violently to ground. "The accident saw her neck broken on the spot," the chaser said.

On Trabonus's return the news propelled him into a rage--and a witch hunt to have blame attributed. Soon enough Trabonus found a note from his mother addressed to him, saying she feared for her life. It suggested foul intentions on the part of his father and brother. While no clear proof could be established, after reading the note Trabonus began hating his father and brother equally.

Standing there now in his War Room, Trabonus's gut tightened while thinking on the subject as if it had happened only yesterday.

Father has paid ... and Waldon, dear brother, you shall see a similar fate. Trabonus clenched his jaw. Mother will not go unavenged. The moment I find that which you hold over me, my action will be swift.

A servant padded up respectfully and offered a refreshment on a silver tray. Trabonus paid it momentary consideration and then, with a short shake of his head, dismissed the offering.

"The hearth and refreshment are ready for your guests, my lord," the servant said before bowing his head and retreating.

Trabonus had always been much stronger in parlor games and intrigue than battlefield prowess. That was Waldon's strength. The last significant coup Trabonus orchestrated saw him bypass his older brother and ascend to the regency.

Betrayer

However, that didn't occur without being stalemated by Waldon. His brother had secured his own safety back then by implementing some devious blackmail. With that, Waldon demanded to be assigned the lesser, but not insignificant, power position of chief magistrate of Flaxor. This gave him theoretical control of the military. That position also by default handed him jurisdiction over the inner-city police force and, in principle, the Royal House Security. The RHS always operated as a sinister cluster of shadowy figures whose loyalty traditionally lay with the regent. Trabonus knew his brother valued control of the RHS most of all. However, the head of RHS operations--Terrance Blackly--ensured that a continued flow of reliable intelligence made its way to Trabonus, which Waldon knew about but could do nothing to stop.

Whispers in the Weirawind court spoke of Trabonus as a good catch in lands and titles, as long as a woman wore a blindfold and was happy to say "Yes" to his every utterance. She had to be indifferent to his daily foul, sour alcohol breath. She also had to accept that his idea of affection amounted to a one-sided liaison, usually as he fell on top of her, drunk. Finally she had to accept that he only felt compelled to bathe once every four passing seasons, whether he needed it or not. In exchange for accepting these minor individual quirks, Trabonus offered riches as positively the wealthiest Flaxon in Ludd. He always lavished the object of his affection with all that wealth could buy, unless he needed it back. She also had her own company of soldiers to take her anywhere she need to go, unless he needed them back. One thing was sure: Trabonus was not a Flaxon to be crossed or underestimated. His memory was long, and retribution toward his enemies knew no bounds.

Trabonus turned his gaze downward upon his newly tailored War Room attire, giving a small smile of satisfaction. The ensemble came complete with a never-drawn ceremonial sword on his right hip. It was clipped to a broad gilded belt that held up his fluted pantaloons. Most of all Trabonus admired his knee-high brown ealk-skin boots, which he personally had a hand in designing. Whispers in the court said he had an odd foot fetish.

So many untapped skills, he thought, rubbing the toe of his left boot on the calf

of his right. *They'll be the height of court fashion, no question. Is there nothing I cannot achieve?*

He imagined some whimsical grand portrait of himself, wearing these very same boots at battle's end while astride a white thoroughbred.

Head held high, I think. Triumphant amidst the ruins of a Scarzen bunker

A flash of lightning and two more cracks of thunder broke his musings and drew his view south.

"With any luck more Scarzen will be dead over there tonight," he whispered to himself.

Then, for a moment, he thought he heard the faintest sinister chuckle in the far distance.

"Hmph," he muttered. "Sometimes the clouds behave as if they have a will of their own, I'm sure of it."

"Everything alright, my lord?" asked a servant standing close by.

Trabonus turned to look at the middle-aged servant. "What? Oh ... no, I'm fine. See to your duties."

Then Trabonus looked back to the storm. *Would that I had such power, Ludd would be ruled as it should be, as the Maker intended--with me guiding its course.*

Behind him servants opened the tall carved timber doors to the War Room. Trabonus turned to see who had arrived. Several representatives of Weirawind City's most influential Flaxon hierarchy entered. Striding in, the silver-haired Magistrate Waldon led the procession. An aide followed on his heels, carrying a documents satchel.

Waldon removed his tricorn hat and clutched it under an arm, giving his brother a steely look while paying the minimal drop of his head in respect.

Not far behind Waldon the head of the Flaxon church, Archbishop Magnus Targus, filled the doorway. His long, gaunt face and stony expression gave

Betrayer

little away, as always. Full-length crimson robes resembling just-hung tapestry left only the bishop's face and hands exposed. Magnus Targus bowed toward Trabonus politely, tall hat still on his head, and then he moved off to his usual seat.

Next, bringing some dignity to the room, came Colonel Ferdinand Hitex, commander of Flaxor's military. A striking figure of a senior Flaxon officer, Colonel Hitex wore grubby white riding trousers, a blue gambeson, and dirty black boots--testimony of him having just returned from a military exercise. Regardless of his journey, Hitex looked unruffled, as was his norm. Like Magistrate Waldon the silver-haired Hitex carried his tricorn hat under one arm.

Taking a couple of strides forward, Hitex stopped. He snapped his heels together with discipline and then presented a salute of his right fist across the heart, along with a shallow bow. Trabonus noticed the gold buttons of Hitex's blue gambeson glistened in the glow of the hearth firelight, then the regent acknowledged him with a slight nod. Hitex moved to the near end of the table and took his appointed seat assisted by a servant.

Finally, bringing a chill to the room of his own, Terrence Blackly entered. Clad in a standard RHS shin-length gray coat and trousers, he looked able to blend in with any shadow, despite being a heavy-set fellow. Holding his derby hat in hand, Blackly showed some stubble on an ordinarily shaven chin, suggesting he'd been traveling rough. After bowing to Trabonus, Blackly stood fast, waiting to be directed by his regent. Trabonus acknowledged him and waved Blackly on. He moved to his seat opposite Colonel Hitex.

Hitex slung Blackly a disapproving glance. "No time for ablutions, Blackly?"

Blackly took one look at Hitex and said, "I see you have had much the same chance, sir."

Interrupting their exchange, a servant approached each of the guests with refreshments.

Meanwhile Waldon directed his aide to place the satchel at his seat at the War Table. Waldon then moved off to the refreshments servery and poured

himself a goblet of wine before approaching Trabonus.

"You wasted no time in summoning us after your last disappearing act," Waldon said, then took a sip of the honey-colored liquid. "I see your faithful hound Blackly has returned. Brought back some scraps for you to frustrate over, has he?"

Trabonus presented a steely glare and tightened jaw at Waldon.

"He won't find what you're seeking, you know," Waldon said. He shot a disdainful glance Blackly's way. "Poor fellow looks like he's been hiding under rocks and running from the Scarzen for his life again." Waldon smiled at his brother. "Aww, still can't find what is so elusive."

"Mind your tone, brother. Don't forget your rightful place."

Waldon patted the right side of his coat, which contained an inside pocket. "Oh, I haven't, little brother." Then Waldon noticed the others now paying attention to their whisperings whilst trying to feign disinterest.

"I'll see your head put to the block for your treachery," Trabonus said, slitting his eyes at his brother.

"You first," Waldon said with soft sarcasm. "Don't forget what will happen if I, my wife, or my children come to any grief. The proof-bearing your personal ring seal—I carry on my person at all times."

Trabonus reached out and grabbed Waldon's arm. Now Waldon knew he'd gotten to his brother.

"Unhand me," Waldon said, looking at the regent's hand on his arm.

Reluctant, Trabonus complied.

Waldon leaned in and whispered, "That poisonous little assassin may have gotten to Father, but he missed me. Now I have him in custody. He's safe, ready at a moment's notice to testify against you."

Trabonus unclipped his sword, clearly incensed. He held out the piece for a

Betrayer

nearby servant to come collect.

"Put this in its place," Trabonus ordered. "And close all the shutters."

"Yes, my lord," replied the servant, taking the weapon and bowing.

Trabonus walked past his brother as if Waldon was never there and then headed for the table. After helping the regent into his seat, a servant placed a small silver bell on the table to his right. Trabonus looked at Blackly, who gave him an almost imperceptible nod. Then Trabonus drew a steady breath, hoping Blackly might have something to show for his absence this past moon.

"Servants may leave," Trabonus announced.

As the servants scurried off, the regent looked toward Waldon, who had moved to the fireplace. Staring into the flames, the magistrate seemed to be deliberately ignoring the others.

"Brother. Do come sit," Trabonus called. "You're brooding again. We've an expanding empire to run."

Waldon did as requested, though a cold reticence clearly accompanied him. Trabonus extracted an elegant flat silver tin from his vest pocket. From it he thumbed a pinch of snuff up his nose. A calamitous sneeze erupted from Trabonus into cupped hands. He took a used nose cloth from a trouser pocket and wiped his face, being sure to dig a finger well inside one hairy nostril to finish. While the bishop and Blackly redirected their point of view, Waldon and Colonel Hitex eyed the regent's common practice with contained umbrage. Trabonus finished his disgusting habit, taking a moment to consider those at his table.

"Good sirs. Before we raise the question of further conquest across Ludd, let us press the trifles out of the way. How goes the ministrations and expansion of trade for our fair Flaxor? Waldon, brother, why don't you begin."

Waldon took momentary pause to consider his next words. He pulled on the broad lapels of his silver-trimmed black vest. Then he took a parchment from the satchel in front of him and finally cleared his throat to speak.

"Taxes are steady, my lord. Coffers have ample sums to manage trade. But the regent's grain stocks are low. Additionally recent raids by the Scarzen on our domestic zukaa herds have cut our volume by 30 percent."

"Is that sustainable?" Bishop Targus asked.

"It is at present," Waldon replied. "But poaching of game in the regent's hunting grounds is a problem. The antler beast herds have become scarcer over the last ten moons. I recommend endorsing a need to cut back on the regular full-moon feasts if their numbers are to grow again."

"Nonsense," Trabonus said. "Our hardworking nobles need to let their hair down for looking after our revolting underclass. Send out patrols. Catch a poacher or two. Make a firm example of them in the main square, and offer reward to those with information leading to conviction. Don't actually pay the fools, of course."

Waldon sighed and moved on. "Poaching has caused some considerable losses. Stores will need to be well managed if we are to see the next leaf-fall and white-fall through. Next, crime is being managed within city walls to acceptable levels. The RHS report a Chou spy was apprehended and turned over to Mr. Blackly's cells for interrogation yesterday. I recommend we try to turn them first. If that fails, torture and information extraction--and a blind trade for the dead body--is acceptable ... just as they have done to us in the past."

Fingers of one hand tapping the table, Trabonus looked at Blackly. "Will you be able to turn them, Blackly?"

"A Chou spy?" Blackly paused, then shrugged. "Difficult to say, my lord," he said in his husky tone. "They pride themselves in having the stamina to hold out against considerable persuasion. The last one wasn't forthcoming, apart from soiling himself before he was gutted on the dungeon block."

Blackly's tone sounded disappointed, thus drawing the colonel's gaze. So Blackly shot Hitex a glance. Seeing the colonel's obvious disdain for him, Blackly smartly ignored it, refocusing his view on Trabonus.

Betrayer

"Stubborn folk, those Chou," Trabonus said. "I'll be so pleased when their lands are in our hands and some civility seeded amongst their slant-eyed masses." He eyed his brother again. "Continue, Waldon."

"Only six hangings this moon, my lord," Waldon said. "From my observation public executions are losing their power. They just don't have the same shock value they did for your predecessor, my lord. Perhaps there might be more forward-thinking ways to keep the citizens in line."

Trabonus raised an eyebrow. "Like what? Giving the commoner an independent vote on who runs things? Really, next you'll be suggesting females should have equal say in court." His expression hardened. "They'll be pressed into submission or be left to fend for themselves in the land of the Scarzen demon."

"Rightly said, my lord," Blackly chimed in.

"Mark my words, gentlemen," Trabonus continued. "I'll not have the good name of Regent Straxus smeared in broad or close company while I lead this fair nation. Certainly not while investigations into his untimely death still proceed."

With those words Trabonus set his gaze on Waldon. The brothers locked stares for an uncomfortable short moment.

"All I'm saying," Waldon went on, "is we'll have to think of something else if we are going to keep their minds where we—uh ... where *you'd* like them, my lord."

Soft and low in Trabonus's ear he heard the same voice he'd been hearing in his dreams of late: "*Give them bread and circuses while you play the real game.*"

"Why not simply step up the pace on the games arena?" Trabonus asked. "Bring them sport and distraction. The suffering of beasts and enemies always helps lift their spirits. Away from that topic now. Tell me of the canal project. When shall I see my navy in harbor at Weirawind? And are the Celeron still barking over freshwater loss and taxes?"

Waldon nodded. "They are. They threaten embargo if we don't reconsider

our terms. Their food trade supplements nearly 25 percent of the city's intake during the leaner moons. If you intend to ignore their request to at least parley, as you have done the past four seasons, I would expect retaliation. If I may remind you, we are fighting a war on three fronts outside our walls: one militarily and two politically. With last season's crop failures a consistent Celeron food supply is vital to the replenishment of our stores. We don't want to be fighting an internal rebellion with our citizens as well, not with that much in play."

"Let me guess, you have a suggestion to guard against such a rebellion?" Trabonus asked.

"I do, my lord. I thought we might cut back a little on the continuing oversupply of church silos. The priests have far more than their fair share."

"I agree," Colonel Hitex said. "Those stores could be put to far better use feeding the columns of my men in the field who patrol and protect our borders. My commanders have reported a decline in morale at being supplied only salted pork and boiled grain to fill our ranks' bellies. The overall health of your army is suffering, my lord. That directly affects the security of Flaxor."

Bishop Targus cleared his throat. "My lord, I must protest. The church's work takes considerable effort. My priests must have strength to exercise proper representation of the One *and* my lordship's interests across the land."

"You can't be serious," Hitex said. "You have enough food stores to feed four of my columns for an entire seasonal round and beyond. You number barely fourteen in total, and the only thing that gets regularly exercised is your stomachs."

The bishop's eyes widened and his mouth dropped open at the comment, but he said nothing.

"Indeed," Waldon jumped in. "Tell me, my good Bishop: When *was* the last time you left our fair city to minister to your flock?"

"Well ... I ... I have duties! I can't be everywhere at once. If I were to be roaming about the hamlets and border towns, I would not be able serve his

Betrayer

lordship's best interests."

Waldon rolled his eyes. "Oh, of course not, Bish--"

"Enough!" Trabonus snapped. "The church stores shall donate 10 percent of their seasonal holdings to the military." Trabonus looked at Hitex. "Can't have our fighting troops going hungry when there is work to be done, can we? Now ... my navy." He cut his eyes at his brother again. "When shall I see our ships in harbor on the northwest wall?"

"You must remember, my lord," Waldon said, "we are not anywhere near the west coast. It's a long way to the ocean. The repairs to the existing infrastructure are holding well, following the damage that the Scarzen saboteurs caused. But it takes time to widen a water course and deepen its flow enough for the kind of vessel you envisage for exploring."

Now Waldon stood and leaned forward, pointing to the map of Flaxor and its borders, sitting in the middle of the table. "Even though we have used the common channel on our western border all the way to the ocean, we still face many months of digging. Engineering solutions around the natural obstructions are costly in both time and resources. Celeron scouts observe every league we progress. We may have made a joint venture for our mutual benefit, but their patience wanes. Our restriction of their freshwater supply--using arguments of needing lower-water levels for the digging--will not hold indefinitely."

"Well, give them something to chew on," Trabonus said. "Make it clear. They can have clink and prosperous trade--or war. Their choice."

Hitex leaned forward in his chair. "Don't forget," he said, "while their army may not match our numbers, the combined force of their battle mages and troops is formidable."

"And," Blackly said, "don't forget the demon race has been seen in parley with them. I've seen it myself when I was in Bon City. Not an ideal situation to have both turn rogue at same time." As he finished saying it, Blackly felt the weight of Hitex's gaze upon him.

Waldon sat back down and gave a curt nod. "On this we agree, Blackly. War would cripple us logistically on the west front, and with the Scarzen constantly pressing from the south, we'd be forced to defend two borders at the same time. The Scarzen will be back, we *all* know that."

Blackly, though, had now turned his eyes to Hitex, who had not ceased staring at him. "Do you have a question for me, Colonel?"

"I'm just wondering what has taken you into the south again. By the sprig of that lint bush on your right sleeve, you've had the courage to go quite a way into Scarzen territories. What is such reconnaissance for, I wonder?"

Blackly gave Trabonus a glance for instruction on how to proceed. Trabonus offered the slightest shake of his head, and so Blackly removed the telltale piece of debris from his jacket sleeve, then faced Hitex again.

"What, you think you are the only one with field agents garnering intelligence, Colonel?" Blackly asked. "I too have a responsibility to my agents who go far and wide to see to our borders' security. I happened to run across a column of your light horse not far from Yorr Pass."

Colonel Hitex stiffened enough to show that the extent of Blackly's excursions came as a surprise.

"So I was just wondering too, as it happens," Blackly said, then gave a small smile. "Why does the colonel need to be conducting clandestine investigations within Weirawind's walls--without the assistance of the RHS?"

"Firstly I have nothing to report," replied Hitex bluntly. "Secondly, Mr. Blackly, my officers, unlike your cluster of sneak-about, operate using Flaxon military's strict ethical standards, both on and off the battlefield." Hitex looked to Trabonus. "My lord, when I have something to report, you shall have it immediately. I'm concealing nothing." Hitex noted Trabonus eyeing him carefully and sighed. "In recent days one of my patrols discovered signs of camp activity not our own near the old northeast wall.

Betrayer

"And who was it?" Trabonus asked.

"It appeared to have been a small Scarzen encampment hurriedly vacated. They must have been taken by surprise, as we rarely find any evidence of them settling in anywhere. I had considered it may be linked with the recent sabotage of the dam, and intended to alert Magistrate Waldon of the find after this meeting."

"Hmm," Waldon said. "Has it anything to do with our ambushed border patrols of late?"

"That is the other possibility," Hitex said. "As the good magistrate knows, a recent covert meeting was set up in the Yorr Fields neutral zone. We had received a letter of truce from the Scarzen, something unheard of previously. It was a request for parley. They asserted a way forward had to be found to stop the guerilla war on our mutual border. The letter asked for a meeting between a small party of my trusted command and a small representative unit from Scarza."

Waldon reached into his satchel for another piece of parchment. "Yes," he said, reading from the document, "a Scarzen noble called ... Titarliaa."

"A Scarzen noble!" Trabonus thumped the table. "Waldon, you go too far. I sanctioned no such thing. You have this demon in custody, I take it?"

"Ah, no, my lord, I do not. That was not the point of the exercise. And, no, you didn't sanction this standard military investigation to gain possible advantage over our lifelong enemy. You were off on a hunting trip with the Chou Dynasty representative in the east. I understand you made first contact with another offering from their king's courtesan court--the Princess Mei Hua, wasn't it?"

Trabonus drew back and furrowed his brow. "What has that to do with the price of chickens?"

Waldon gave a weak shrug. "You sanctioned my governance of the borders on the day of your ascension to regency, and therefore this request for a meeting fell under my jurisdiction--Article 9 of the Flaxon Charter of Land Defense, if you recall. Thus, in the regent's absence, I was obligated to act once said information came to light. To not have done so would have seen me in breach of

my duty as Flaxor's high magistrate."

Trabonus knew he had no credible counter to his brother's superior knowledge of the law. He licked his thin lips, contemplating a response.

"See it through," came a faint whisper from behind the regent's ear. *"Let him have his game."*

"Why would you even consider such a parley?" Trabonus asked. "My standing orders are to have every Scarzen's head on a javelin and displayed on our common border."

"A law we vigilantly attempt to uphold, my lord," Hitex said. "But a tall order to be accomplished against the likes of the Scarzen. It has proven hard to do over the last two Flaxon generations despite our most determined efforts. Unless we have them at a distance on open ground, with overwhelming onager and cross-bolt coverage, their battle circles, stature, and sheer agility dominate the field."

"Yet several times you've achieved decisive victories in seasons past," Waldon offered in support.

"Yes, but only at the cost of great numbers to do so," Hitex said. "Numbers that are not sustainable in a protracted war."

Waldon sighed and faced his brother. *"I sanctioned the parley, yes. I believed the intelligence gleaned from such a meeting would expose that a plot designed to weaken Flaxor's defenses was in play. I believe that even more firmly now. I believe the Scarzen to be instruments of destruction."*

"Really? How so?" Trabonus asked.

"I will say first that many of your loyal troops sacrificed their lives to uncover the truth," Waldon said.

"That is what troops are for," Trabonus said.

Thankfully Hitex ignored the heartless comment.

Betrayer

Waldon leaned forward to speak. "We found evidence that the Chou intend on pitting us against the Scarzen in open war. Once both sides are sufficiently weakened, the Chou then mean to sweep in to take both Flaxor and Scarza in a single bold move."

Somewhat surprised at the Chou's audacity, Trabonus just sat in his chair, thinking through what had just been reported.

"Hmmm," Blackly said. "As a matter of fact, I heard a whisper that the expressions of love by Princess Mei Hua were naught but a ploy on the Chou king's part. My informant said that he planned to have you kidnapped, my lord-- something I could not prove or dismiss ... until now. My informant said that the stubbing of your toe in camp and subsequent early departure saw their opportunity undone. This would seem to corroborate the information just now laid bare here."

Waldon rolled his eyes again and said, "So, Blackly, back to the letter. I smelled the guile of the Chou. The note said the Scarzen wished to parley over water issues near the south neutral zone."

"Anything involving the Scarzen is a deception," Trabonus said.

"Correct," Waldon said, nodding. "But not when it comes to battlefield honor and the giving of their word as warriors."

"Agreed," Hitex said. "This has been proven at every turn that my officers and I have experienced in my fifty full seasons as head of military. The Scarzen say what they mean in such arrangements, and if everyone sticks to the agreement, parties separate without bloodshed--to kill or be killed on another day."

"What's your point?" Trabonus asked.

Waldon reached for his satchel and held it in his hands at the ready. "Certain terms used in the common tongue of the note are never used by the Scarzen in parley," he said. "But the Chou, who have had far fewer dealings with the Scarzen than we, would not know that. Scarzen use of common tongue script is impatient and direct."

Waldon now produced two bloodstained parchment notes and laid them on the table. "The note to us is styled with the guile of a royal court. Not like a Scarzen communication at all. A Scarzen hand in common tongue is forceful. The words are almost scratches, just like that unintelligible scrawl they used in the note we intercepted on its way to the Celeron."

"Still have trouble decipherin' it," Blackly cut in.

"Look here at the structure," said Waldon, pointing at one parchment. "It is far too refined. And then this note we apparently sent them bearing your signature ... It is consistent with our way of communicating, but there is one major flaw."

"Which is?" Trabonus asked.

"You didn't write or send such a note, my lord."

"I see," said Trabonus, hand cupping his chin. "So a meeting took place, then?"

"It did," Hitex said. "As you can see, both notes describe a maximum of three per side to attend. My officer, Major Bollard, disregarded the note's orders and took almost a full company, likely intending an ambush. Very foolish since the Yorr Fields neutral zone is the perfect combat ground for the Scarzen."

"And what happened?" Trabonus asked.

Waldon looked to each of the Flaxon at the table, then back at his brother. "We did not carry the day well. When nothing was heard from Major Bollard for some time, I sent a patrol to find out what happened. It seems a massacre of our side ensued after the Scarzen reacted to an ambush and what must have been seen as a breaking of the agreement. As we've discussed, they are sticklers for such protocol."

"And?" Trabonus said.

"Dead to the last soldier, I'm afraid," Waldon said. "There was some evidence of Quall involvement too. Small footprints were found next to the body of

Betrayer

a very large Scarzen who'd met their match at close quarters."

Blackly shook his head and stared into nothingness as he muttered, "Nasty little devils, those bloody Quall." He placed a couple fingers on a nasty scar on his right cheek, remembering his own painful experience.

"We also recovered some Quall arrows," Waldon said. "And two signature throwing blades as added proof of their involvement. The blades are unique to the clan of Black Mountain. Whom they were working for can't be determined, as happens in most cases with the Quall."

Turning a bit, Waldon gave a sharp glance to his brother. "They must have left in a hurry. They are rarely that careless."

"Quall!" the bishop nearly spat. "Wretched vermin--bile of the evil one."

"To be sure, Your Grace," Hitex said. "However, I seem to recall the church too has seen the need for their services from time to time. Situations requiring plausible deniability when an infidel is identified, no?"

The bishop shuffled in his seat and cleared his throat. "Well. One must fight fire with fire to protect our fragile masses."

Ignoring the verbal sparring, Trabonus asked, "Why couldn't the Scarzen have employed the Quall? They are both as abhorrent as each other."

Hitex shook his head. "As I've mentioned, Scarzen have an honor code and do their *own* killing. The use of Quall to do a Scarzen's work would be beneath them, particularly in something as disdainful as a double-cross in open parley. Just because Scarzen are twice as tall as us and have features akin to chiseled stone, it does not mean they are dullards. My scout found Scarzen boot prints that indicated a very small party, no more than three--per the agreement. After the skirmish they were the only boot prints leading away ... south."

Waldon gave a heavy sigh. "Three versus thirty for a total loss of the greater number is embarrassing."

"Unacceptable is what it is!" Trabonus said.

"It is the mark of their prowess on the battlefield," Hitex said. "Something we as soldiers must learn from and respect--or be prepared to take huge losses time and again."

Trabonus waved the comment off and asked, "What did you ultimately hope to achieve with your battlefield play, Colonel?"

"An enemy of my enemy can at times be made my ally, and put to good use," Hitex said.

Blackly snorted a laugh, then asked, "Is that from Hitex's *Battlefield Manual of 'What the frick do we do now when our ass is handed to us?'*"

Hitex glared at him. "No, Blackly. It's from Hitex's observation of victors and vanquished in war. Learn from your enemy's victories, Blackly, or die wishing you had. Surely the esteemed spymaster understands such basics of war." Hitex looked back to the regent. "Once the magistrate and I learned what the Chou had attempted to do, my aim was to have the Scarzen focus turned on a common enemy--a move that would hopefully provide a crippling blow to the Chou without the loss of one Flaxon soldier."

"Oh, that's very calculating, Colonel," the bishop said.

"Yes, it was. Such a coup would have forced the Chou king to commit his forces and logistics elsewhere, allowing for a sound offensive to be mounted in the east. Victory in hand, we would then march on the Chou capital of Da Loong. The subsequent siege would see them sue for peace in a matter of a few short moons. In this way we would keep both the Chou and Celeron in their place."

Trabonus, the bishop, and Blackly exchanged glances, impressed by the audacity of Hitex's plan. It came as no surprise to Waldon, however, who just sat there grinning smugly. He knew his friend's capability well enough.

"Whether the Quall were paid by the Chou to assassinate officers on both sides to incite war from the shadows will never be known," Waldon said. "It fits with

Betrayer

usual Chou methodology in my mind, however. One thing is sure: the Scarzen trust us less now than ever. Major Bollard's actions sent the message to the Scarzen command that our leaders are unscrupulous and impulsive. They will use that. I would."

Trabonus sat back in his seat, blowing a breath through his lips with a harsh flutter. "Well, this is an unexpected turn of events," he said. "I think it's time to take a moment to ponder this. We shall break and return to conclude shortly."

All nodded in agreement and stood to stretch their legs. After pouring some wine, Waldon joined Hitex by the center windows. The latched outside shutters lightly tapped the window frames, buffeted by the gale. A focused conversation began between the two that didn't go unnoticed by Blackly, who'd kept to himself while sipping on a mug of char near the hearth. Trabonus and the bishop, meanwhile, had moved to the other side of the hearth in clandestine conversation of their own.

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