

HIGHLANDER CHRONICLES:

Forms of Betrayal

By Randall N. Bills

**Near House of Scions
Capella City, Capella
Capellan Confederation
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The freezing winter air bit nails of hoarfrost into his skin. With night falling precipitously in Capella's northern latitudes, the cold dipped as well, nails transforming to razor-tipped raptor claws, shredding skin with the cold's incessant need to destroy warmth.



Collin hunched within the synthetic coat, his cavernous, gleaming eyes searching the night like powerful radar attempting to lock on target, while his right hand caressed a mahogany grip: waiting. The shadows of the inset entryway of a small office complex coated him with invisibility—darkness protected its own.

Herds of doe-eyed civilians moved in choreographed stampedes: stepping slowly, with dread of the cold, towards the department store exit, reaching for the door with a deep breath. Then a stampede two stores down, and back to warmth, grimaces and shivers giving way to childlike laughs at evading the cold and the things of the night.

Collin dismissed them.

An elderly couple turned the street at his left, and his eyes pulled and locked on. Their happy chatter, at odds with the hurried pace and pained voices of the younger crowds, jounced his ears; the fingers of his right hand continued to stroke the grain of well-oiled wood for reassurance. The small dog at their feet padded along, as though despite its hairlessness it could not feel the cold. Though Collin found such dogs an abomination—if you wanted a dog, get a *dog*, not a rodent—the proud way the animal stepped, head high and defiant against the night and what it brought... yeah, that deserved a nod, rodent or no.

Perhaps it has its own warmth within—something that drives it into this cold night, like me.

As they drew nearer, their words puffed out amongst billowing clouds of white.

“But dear, the Chancellor should know better,” the elderly woman said, voice trembling lightly with age, yet still firm with opinions.

The elder gentleman, bundled in his long-coat and hat decades out of date, turned cherub-red cheeks towards his wife. “Honey, not again.” Though still at some distance, Collin detected the shifting of the man’s eyes despite his exacerbated voice.

The man was nervous.

“Don’t *honey* me. Just because he’s the Chancellor does not mean he’s infallible. We just finished the Rim War and now he’s insulting House Marik. How can one man make so many mistakes? Does he want to destroy the Confederation?”

“Shhh...” the husband said, hands waving placatingly as they drew abreast of Collin, head swiveling to follow clumps of quickly moving young.

Yes, very nervous. As he should be. Such disrespect for the Supreme Chancellor? Though Collin’s lips did not move, a smile gleamed in his dangerous eyes.

Abruptly aware of Collin’s presence, the dog began barking loudly. The elderly couple, pulled from their conversation, glanced down at the dog and then in Collin’s direction. Leaning within the shadowed doorway, they did not immediately make him out. Collin shifted slightly (hurry them along) and they both jumped.

As you should. Maskirovka may be out of favor, but such seditious talk would not go over well, out of favor or not.

Collin looked down at the dog, harsh eyes meeting the excited, angry canine’s. The yapping petered off; the dog lowered its head, wrapped its tail between its legs and sidled behind the couple.

Even dogs knew when to avert their eyes.

Collin glanced back up to find the couple staring as though seeing a ghost. They looked as though an apparition had materialized from their traitorous words, spun to life out of their puffing breaths on the cold, night air.

The woman recovered first (she would), and nodded her head formally. "I apologize young man, for staring. We didn't see you there." She waited, as though expecting an answer and glanced nervously at her husband when he didn't respond.

"Well," the man finally cleared his throat. "I..." he began, glanced to his wife and back again, pulled on the dog's chain. "Good night, sir."

They both moved away, heads craning surreptitiously to see if he followed, as they subconsciously found themselves mimicking the younger herds, racing to find some escape from the things of the night.

But there was no escape. As ever.

Collin set them from mind like a tossed cigarette butt, shifted his grip within the voluminous pockets of the parka (still not used to the civilian clothing), resettled the weight in his right hand and resumed his scan of the street. He doubted anyone noticed the exchange—if they'd spoiled it, he might have unkind words to trade with them later.

Yet, as time ticked on and the chill beast latched stronger claws into the city—people raced faster to find shelter from the cold—he mulled over the couple's obvious conversation. A conversation he knew mirrored on a hundred such streets, a hundred such worlds, between thousands. Though Collin never doubted, the few words deftly picked from the elderly couple managed to increase his warmth within, firm his resolution.

We are not all herds. We've not all forgotten our greatness and what has been done to us.

A low whistle penetrated his reverie, a tuneless ditty tossed from uncaring lips.

Collin's eyes roved towards the sound. A middle-aged man without a hat (so careless, he'll catch a cold), rich, dark green overcoat almost scraping the ground, as though a royal robe. Walking briskly, head high, the man stepped lightly. As with Collin, the cold did not affect him.

Like the dog.

Collin smiled then. And like the dog, he fully expected the man to avert his eyes and push his tail to protect his groin before this was finished. However, as the man neared, the slight nod of respect

quickly turned sour, dropping into Collin's pool of loathing, widening and deepening the crevasse within. The dog, after all, affected no one but himself with such pride.

You, dog, affect us all. Destroy us all.

The man simply walked past.

Collin shook his head at such arrogance. Not even a close detail? Then again, Collin knew the man would be alone, at least in his immediate vicinity, having shadowed him on his way to the House of Scions every Thursday night like clockwork. How he'd lived this long Collin couldn't understand. Predictability, after all, meant death. Didn't matter if you were in a 'Mech or walking the streets of your city, your world.

As though a shadow detached from the wall, the night gave him up and Collin stepped from the doorway and matched his footfalls with that of his target to avoid notice. He closed the distance in four long steps, withdrew the needler. The mahogany hand-grip gleamed darkly in the night as he leveled the weapon at his target's head.

Perhaps feeling Collin's presence, the man swiveled his head to look over his shoulder as Collin's index finger settled through the trigger guard and caressed.

Of all the looks to flicker across the man's face (surprise, shock, horror), the one to mold his features into their final expression in life was unexpected. Able to read most men as easily as the morning paper, the man's look screamed outrage. *How dare you do this? What could I have done to you? I can order worlds eradicated.*

Do you know who I am?!

The gun, a well-oiled and loved KR-J needler pistol, worked as well this time as it had the previous eight-hundred and thirteen times Collin used it. Having already prepared its ammo for discharge by shaving off a packet of needle-thin splinters from the polymer-composite block housed in the handgrip, the pistol coughed softly (the scuff of a shoe on pavement), sending the needles out in a blast of compressed gas. With the gun scant centimeters from the man's left cheek, they sliced into his skin with the ease of a steak-knife through well-cooked veal.

Steel-hard needles pulped flesh, shredded it, bloodily carving and pulling off the entire left side of the man's face in a spray of

warm blood, which caused a sudden bloom of steam in the cold air—a feast of warmth for the night’s cold hunger.

The skin and cartilage of the nose disintegrated under the onslaught. So close to the man’s face, the force of the blast jabbed a quivering mass of flechettes straight into the cheekbone, riddling it like instantaneous leukemia. The bone collapsed inward under the mass of weight and inertia.

Yet the light of life had already fled. With the man’s head angled slightly back as he glanced over his shoulder, his left eye created a straight shot directly into the frontal lobe. With the barrel lined up arrow straight with his left eye socket, the majority of the flechettes pulped the eye and stormed into his brain, synapse pathways shredded and destroyed under a hundred pinpricks of death.

The man’s head jerked back around and he fell to the ground in a heap of useless flesh.

Already holstering the gun, Collin grasped the prepared storm drain which lay right next to the body and heaved it open, ignoring the skin searing cold of the metal on his fingers.

“Of course I know who you are,” he said. Though soft, only for his ears and that of the dead man, the years of hatred for the man’s actions spilled into the night, a cataract of rage and despair at seeing this man rape and sell off greatness.

Collin savagely kicked the body several times to send it tumbling down into the sewers.

He paused for a heartbeat, watching the body disappear in a spray of offal and filth, then dropped the large metal grate back into place. Collin stood, breathing in the air that knifed into his lungs—a piercing pain that brought peace and clarity. Despite his best efforts, Collin knew the detail would be on him in seconds. Knew the stories they would spin would make it a dozen men, fighting their way past armed guards valiantly fighting for his life...knew that would be the version history would remember, if the history books remembered Collin’s name at all.

But he didn’t care. He’d killed the dog and they would never find his body. They could never lay it next to those deserving of the people’s worship.

He glanced around, non-descript features wrapped in the first true smile in a decade, as troops of men began to emerge from the night, their screams to “halt” and “get down” breaking into

the thin air with sharpness. Casually, he kneeled down and then lay flat on the drain cover.

He only hoped his Highlanders would not pay for his actions. Then again, not all such actions were betrayals and sometimes someone needed to step up. Needed to make things right again.

He smiled again as a heavy knee pounded into his kidney and a cold muzzle nestled into the hair at the nape of his neck, while strong hands wrenched his arms back into handcuffs.

Laughter bubbled within, then pierced the night to jumble among the feet of so many troops.

This will be your only gravestone. We're not all herds to follow you blindly.

Good bye, Chancellor.

The End