

Betrayal

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Far from Theros, on the plane of Fiora, the High City of Paliano is home to countless intrigues and plots. The high lords of the city vie for supremacy. Move is met with countermove, and trust with betrayal, all under the auspices of the immortal King Eternal. But the king was a living man, once, and a friend to the elf explorer Selvala...



The walls of the king's private dining chamber were lit with enchanted gems, each carefully placed atop a carved marble rod—a carefully crafted simulacrum of a candle, but without any trace of warmth. The chamber was in the heart of the castle complex, and no natural light reached this far.

The table was large enough to seat twelve, but only two dined this night. The king, Brago, skin pale and cracked, like old parchment paper, rested in an ornate chair. His guest, Selvala, sat at the opposite end, a feast spread out between them. The king's plate was empty. The elf's plate was untouched.

"Why do we still do this, my king?" There was a hardness to the last word, like tension in a copper wire. "Why do we go through these motions anymore? I know it pains you to see me, and it pains me to see what you have become."

The king's eyes flickered, but his body was still for a long moment until a raspy voice escaped his cracked lips.

"Because you help me remember."

Selvala shook her head. "That's not enough, anymore. Maybe it used to be. Before all... this... got so far out of hand." She waved a hand in his direction, disgust plain on her face. "Whether you remember him or not, you are not the king you once were. I remember that man. That man was my friend. And seeing you, sitting in his chair, wearing what's left of his face, is an insult to that man. An insult to the things we stood for."

Brago's body convulsed, and he let loose a choking gasp. Selvala recognized it as his laughter. "Maybe... I should have listened to you. Maybe you should have made me listen."

Selvala's face flushed with anger. "Oh no. You don't get to put this on me. I warned you. In the very beginning, I begged you not to let the Custodi begin their treatments."

"But you relented. We still had so much work to do. For the city."

Selvala narrowed her eyes. The king had already said more in this exchange than he had in their last two dinners combined.

"What's going on, old friend? What has changed?" Her voice softened.

"In the beginning, you and I shared a vision."

The City was young. Young, optimistic, and ambitious, and Count Brago was all of these things as well. Born third son to a minor house, his prospects would have been limited anywhere else. But not here. Not in the City. In the City, a person's dreams and ambitions were the only source of limitation, and Brago could see far, indeed. He could see past the petty grudges and bureaucrats. He could see past the flitting fashions, the endless squabbles for glory and fame. He saw the raw potential of what the City could be. He saw its beating heart, and it thrummed in perfect synchronicity with his own. And he could see a path to that potential. Slim, perhaps. Winding. Treacherous. And he could not walk it alone.



Selvala, Explorer Returned | Art by Tyler Jacobson

linebreak

“Ha! You speak to me of a vision? That was seventy years ago, you old fool. Yes. Yes, when I was as much a fool as you have become, I believed in you. Your words dripped with honey and light and I believed. Which makes your betrayal all the more bitter, old friend.”

“Betrayal?” Brago’s voice rose, almost taking on a human tone once more. “I never. I never lost sight of what was best for the City. Even now.”

The two were inseparable, and they worked together flawlessly. He was a terror in the courts and council chambers, his arguments flawless, his entreatments irresistible. He built up a coalition of nobility, clergy, and the merchant class. He rooted out corruption and replaced it with humility. But always, always, more power ended up in his hands.

She was beloved by the people, had her fingers on the pulse of every community and enclave. She fought for the rights of immigrants, and convinced many of the old titled nobility to give up privileges that oppressed the public, before the public rose up to depose them. Together, they drafted the Charter. Ratification was unanimous. It was their hands, clasped together, that forged Paliano.

“You lost sight of everything once you started to value your own life above those you served. How long did you let yourself believe that what the Custodi were doing was medicine?”

“It was. I wasn’t going to let my health stop us from achieving our goals.”

“Everyone dies, Brago! Everyone ages, everyone dies. Peasants and kings alike.”

Brago laughed, a real laugh this time. “That must be easy for you to say, looking just a few years older now than when we met. You can’t say what you would have done in my place.”

Selvala looked down, and paused. “Perhaps not.”

King Brago had been on the throne just three years when the doctors diagnosed his illness. Hereditary and incurable. He would not last the year. Selvala was devastated. Brago was in shock. When the priests came to him and told him there were treatments he could undergo that would magically preserve his body, he was cautious.

He and Selvala discussed and debated the matter extensively. Neither liked the idea of putting his life in the hands of the priesthood, but each feared what would happen should the new king die so soon. The alliances they had struggled to build could crumble in a heartbeat. The shining city could return itself to glittering ashes so quickly. In the end, they relented. The Custodi were formed, and the king lived. And he lived. And he lived.



Art by Alex Horley-Orlandelli

linebreak

"History will judge me fairly. All that we have achieved. All the good we have done. It was the only way."

"Brago, if I heard those words from any other man's lips, I would know him to be a tyrant."

Brago seemed to deflate again. "Selvala. There will be no more treatments."

Shock, joy, and fear flashed across Selvala's face. She stood, walked to his side, and knelt next to his chair. She took his dry hand in hers. It was neither warm nor cold, and felt to the touch like nothing so much as an old leather-bound book. "Brago. This is the right choice. By all we held dear, I will miss you, but this is the right thing."

Brago coughed, a rattling, wheezing sound. "No. It is not like that. There will be no more treatments, because they have gone too far. I cannot die, Selvala. My mind will rot in this cage of bones and skin. It has already begun. My eyes have all but gone already. I cannot eat, I cannot sleep. I no longer hurt, but for a long time, I hurt very badly. Now, I miss even the pain."

Selvala sprung to her feet, furious, her hand reflexively grasping the hilt of her long hunter's knife. "Those monsters! What have they done to you? For what they've done, I should..."

Brago lifted a limp hand. "No. No. Turn your anger toward me. Where it can yet serve you. Selvala. I cannot die naturally. But I think I must die. And you are one of only three people in the City who is permitted a weapon in my presence."

Selvala closed her eyes. As soon as he had said the words, she knew that she would do this for him. "Brago. You were a good king. A good man." She stood, stared him in the milky blue eyes, and drew her knife. "I forgive you."

She thrust the blade once into the king's heart. There was almost no resistance, like stabbing a knife into a sack of dry grain. His ancient body began to crumble almost immediately, and as he fell to dust, he whispered two words:

"You won't."

Selvala strode out of the dining room, and cast her knife on the floor. The guards escorted her away without a word.

The Custodi shuffled into the cold throne room, hands concealed in their long sleeves for warmth as much as propriety. Gray faces, hard-eyed men and women, peered out from under embroidered hoods. They formed a circle, and the eldest spoke. "The King is dead. We will keep the news contained as long as we can, but the knowledge will escape these walls. Before it does, if we wish to remain in power, we have much work to do."

The temperature in the room dropped suddenly, and the lights flickered. A presence entered the room. Cold, and angry.

A blue mist began to coalesce, wisps creeping out of the patterns in the smooth marble floor. A few of the Custodi gasped and staggered backwards. The mist grew thicker, denser, and it flowed like a river in an unseen bed.

The Custodi were startled; they looked from hooded face to hooded face for any sign that one of them might understand. Finding no solace, the priests looked around the room, increasingly frantic.

A shimmer appeared before the throne. The mist drew itself up and formed the shape of a man, and the idea of armor became solid around him. Eyes stared down at the Custodi, dark yet aglow, and the priests cowered before him in fear.



Brago, King Eternal | Art by Karla Ortiz

“You will do no such thing. You will announce what has happened. That the great work of the Custodi is complete. That your king has risen, mind as strong as ever, freed from the prison of his body. This is a day of celebration.” The spirit’s voice was deep and stern. “For you have succeeded. Unless you wish to tell me that your treatments had another goal in mind?”

Panic flew across the faces of the Custodi. They stammered their confusion, until the eldest stepped to the front of the huddled crowd.

“Of course, my king. Let none doubt your words.” She looked over her shoulder to the others, who each bent their knee.

“Hail, my king.”

“Hail, King Brago.”

“All hail Brago, King Eternal.”

