

# QUALL ASSASSIN

Talaza's Contract

Citadel 7 Novella 5

YUAN JUR

Citadel 7 Series

# Quall Assassin

**Talaza's Contract**

**Talaza Bane is an assassin. His next target is now identified.  
To his employer he is an instrument.**

**Sometimes instruments rebel.**

Novella 5

Yuan Jui

**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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## **Dedication**

To the dedicated Citadel 7 crew, the backers LMA, Copy Editor JDK, Cover artist "Ralph the Brush" Manis, production manager CW, promotion LA and beta testers NC, DW & Co, thank you. These are the people no one hears about. You all continue to be awesome. Thanks for helping the Citadel 7 fans Enter The Superverse.

Finally, a special dedication to our amazing and inspirational structure editor, Mary Rosenblum, who tragically passed in the early months of 2018. Thank you Mary, your guidance and confidence in our series will be carried in our hearts always.



"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.

**MISSION AUTHORIZATION:** EVERCYCLE SEVEN.

**MISSION POINT OF ORIGIN:** TORAN STAR SYSTEM, PLANET TORA.

**PLANET SECURITY LEVEL:** 10.

**LOCAL TIME:** CLASSIFIED.

**LOCATION:** LUDD CONTINENT.

**MISSION CATALYST:** DETECTION OF RIFT IN NATURAL KARMA STREAM.

**CONSCRIPTION OF INDIGENOUS MORTALS:** APPROVED

# Act 1

# CHAPTER

# 1

## Tasked with Trouble

*It is late afternoon during the season of leaf-fall. A storm is in the distance. Bitter cold wind and the onset of rain have begun battering the terrain across the continent of Ludd. A member of Black Mountain's Quall Assassin Cosa Clan, Talaza, stands on a lonely outcrop in deep thought. He is looking to the border east. He knows his mountain can be seen from distant leagues by many of his clan's employers. Staring away to the far horizon, he contemplates recent turbulent events. He is alone, as always, speaking his thoughts aloud:*

"I am Talaza Bane. Enemies and allies call our world 'Tora.' It means 'engage.' Our land is Ludd's heart. This is where the heavens turned Quall from light to solid and our purpose was defined by the voice on the wind who spoke to our first mystic, Korta.

The deep ocean waters lay many days' walk through dangerous forest and ribbon grasses of the rolling tundra away to east Ludd's shores. Our Cosa Clan and mystics are oldest of all Quall clans and have far reach and respect even amidst those with only two arms and legs. We Quall of Black Mountain are highest prized in the Quall Assassin Guild of greater Ludd for our stealth, use of blade, and secret ways of removing our patron's targets. There are many



Kurja—those with open face—who need a Quall's skill to remove what they cannot. Other clans not Quall are known to us beyond the shadow of Black Mountain. Our mountain's heart has not shaken since my youth when my face was covered from sunlight. Elder Makayass says Black Mountain is pleased with our clan's determination to fulfill our purpose before we are returned to dust. We Quall of Black Mountain in turn respect the life and sanctuary our mountain provides.

"As I stand on this red cliff looking down on the stendle tree valley below, with only my thoughts to listen to, the winds have changed and grown cold for another round. Leaf-fall is at hand. Soon the water-silk will begin to drop, covering the earth in white. In rounds past, Quall of Black Mountain would not leave until the season of bloom begins. But since Mystic Tatute told Elder Makayass of seeing the Star Lord descend in the west valley, I know this time will be different."

A lull in the wind allowed his keen hearing to pick up the steps of someone on approach. He looked over his shoulder to see the familiar slender form of his wife, Analuke, moving toward him.

"Talaza?" she called. "Talaza! Oh, there you are. Thought I might find you here on your ledge. Arguing in your head again?"

Talaza harrumphed as his wife closed the distance and stopped behind him just beyond arms' reach. He folded both sets of his arms and turned to look back to the horizon.

"My bones are uneasy, Analuke. We have been wed long enough for you to know my bones don't lie. I know our mountain will see great change very soon."

Though he wasn't looking at her, Talaza knew Analuke was rolling her eyes, as she always did when he spoke like this.

"You could at least turn around to talk to me, husband. Your eyes always tell to me the deeper meanings before your words caress my ears. Talaza,

## Quall Assassin - Talaza's Contract

please."

Reluctantly, Talaza turned to face her.

She nodded. "That's better. Oh, but look at you . . . Fingers twitching on all four hands! And you look like you've forgotten how to wrap your head." Her eyes sparkled with mischief, betraying the smile that surely played on her lips beneath her own head wraps. "What example is this for our sons?"

"My concerns are for all our future with what we've seen." He let the two arms covering his lower ribs fall by his side and then dropped his eye line for a moment. "Nervous? Yes, of course I am, wife! You saw it too, up close."

Analuke sighed. "Husband, you were supposed to be tutoring Sooza in blade craft an hour ago. His rite of passage is coming soon; he's depending on you. What has you so picked apart? We presented our findings and there is an end to it."

"Analuke . . . when Makayass ordered us to investigate the place Tatute spoke of and bring back what our eyes beheld, I thought it would be something quite different. What we had to tell caused much whisper between Mystic Tatute and Elder Makayass."

"So? They always do a lot of whispering."

Talaza shook his head. "Not like this time. This was different. When that falling star slowed and settled in the forest below, it really stirred them up. There is a deeper meaning, Analuke. The Star Lords are planning something. They are in league with the wind's voice—I know it."

"Husband, Elder Makayass has been to consult Mystic Tatute many times as the moons have crossed our sky this round."

"Yes, wife of mine, but Elder Makayass sent messengers to the other clans this time and then called for the Great Circle to convene. Not in half my lifetime has he done that. That was two nights ago. And we are also on the eve

of a master-level elimination. It is not a good sign."

"We all heard Mystic Tatute, under the sign of both half-moons and in front of all the clan elders of the four directions. Yes, he told of a great change coming to our world. But it was the *stranger* he seemed more concerned about than the Star Lords. He said it is the stranger we must prepare for. The stranger is the one who will bring the change. We are but soldiers who have our place. Elder Makayass points us and we eliminate the target. That's all we need to concern ourselves with, husband. If that target be the stranger, then we shall see the order filled and then move on."

Talaza began to pace slowly back and forth. "Mystic Tatute said he heard the Dark Star's voice on the wind again this morning, wife. This always means an omen of twisted things. And twisted things never favor the Quall in the long run. I have seen it."

"So my husband is now a mystic too?"

"Stop straining your top-knot, wife. You know what I meant! Tatute is never wrong."

"Well, you best come see what else he has to say, then. The bones have chosen you and me to leave the mountain. We must see to a problem involving a Scarzen captain and one of the Flaxon regent's high officials from Weirawind. Does *that* sound like something to better occupy your time?"

Talaza nodded.

"Come on," Analuke said. "We have been summoned."

\*~\*~\*

At the center of Black Mountain hamlet stood Elder Makayass's wood-and-stone Yurt of Parley. Talaza and Analuke entered. Inside they smelled the scent of fragrant leaves burning amongst the ashes of the in-ground fire pit in the yurt's center. While sparse in its furnishing, the space was welcoming, with rugs

## Quall Assassin - Talaza's Contract

strewn at different strategic places for guests of different status. Talaza watched smoke spiral aloft in ribbons to dissipate through a conical cover sealing the roof. He unclasped his hamlet plaid. Analuke, two paces behind, did the same with her arisaid. Both folded their shoulder garment displaying their clan colors into the customary triangle shape. They then moved toward the interview rugs near the feet of Elder Makayass. Mystic Tatute, scrawny in build even for a Quall, stood to Makayass's left. His thin-fingered black-gloved hands pressed over the pommel of his divining spear that stood level to his sternum.

Tall for a Quall at five feet two inches, Makayass sat on a robust U-shaped stendle-wood throne. The skin of a majestic Great Mountain Bearcat adorned the backrest. The head of the predator sat mounted on a hidden frame at his right shoulder. Its open jaws exposed the creature's double rows of back angled teeth that had been rumored to have left their mark on Makayass. This was the carnivore that he had killed to earn his rite of passage as clan leader. The bearcat skin's tan-and-black striped coloring sat in contrast against the black-and-crimson bindings covering Makayass from head to knee. His indigo blue torso overgarment remained partially obscured by his body-length golden brown Elken skin apron of office.

Makayass gestured for the two arrivals to sit. Complying, they sat side by side after pressing the palms of their top two hands together in respectful salute. Their leader looked to the entrance and dismissed the two gray-clad assassins concealed in shadow on either side of the door. He leaned forward, resting one elbow on an arm rail of his throne.

"Your observations have caused quite a stir," Makayass said.

Talaza glanced at Analuke. "Told you," he said under his breath.

"You have both been chosen for a task of great importance," said Makayass. "A task where a Quall's skill will be tested to the highest level."

Makayass shot Tatute a glance before continuing, "Mystic Tatute has foreseen a fork in the road of the destiny for all who occupy Ludd."

Tatute stepped forward, his cutting stare bent first on Talaza and then Analuke. He raised his divining spear speaking in an aged cracked tone. "Hear my words, Blades of this clan. The dawn of a new way approaches and brings chaos and much unnecessary loss of life. The Dark Star, Hex, has spoken to Tatute on the wind and in dream. The bones confirm his words. A stranger, one who is not natural to this world, is coming. We must alter the course of his influence. An opportunity has arisen."

"Yes," Makayass cut in. "I have received word from the Chou king, Wang So Tan, of a clandestine meeting between the Scarzen of Talon East and the Flaxon of Weirawind City. It will take place in two turns of the sun in the mid night of the second day. They meet at the mouth of Yorr Pass, in the Neutral Zone."

Talaza and Analuke glanced at each other.

Makayass went on, "Three is the number reported to attend for each clan and involves a parley about the expansion of the Neutral Zone. Wang So Tan, our present patron, has sent each a forged invitation. He has also issued a strike order on the leader of each clan's delegation. He requests the placing of incriminating evidence on each target, blaming the other for the strike. Talaza shall strike the Flaxon target, you, Analuke, shall deal with the Scarzen commander."

Talaza passed another glance Analuke's way.

"Your eyes express quandary, Talaza," Makayass said.

Talaza went to speak, but Analuke's words pushed forward first: "Great Makayass. The Scarzen and the Flaxon have been at knife point since Quall were transformed from light. Anyone who knows the two clans would find such negotiations to their mutual benefit . . . umm—suspicious. Chou are devious in their dealings, known often for abandoning an ally to save their own neck. Remember what happened to Menengus four seasons ago?"

## Quall Assassin - Talaza's Contract

Makayass nodded.

"Then I ask you: why would the Scarzen sympathize with anything the Flaxon have to say? The only way they have spoken for generations is with sharp blades and much death. I believe that Wang So Tan's true target is the Quall. I think there is no meeting. I think he intends to lay blame on us. Quall ore makes blade metal second only to that of the Scarzen. He has failed in previous negotiations for the ore our mountain contains. Why not get others to obliterate the Quall while he moves in from our northern border to claim the spoils?"

"Menengus was your brother, Analuke," said Makayass. "I understand your pain. Should that be the case, then Quall law applies and Wong So Tan himself shall become the prime target of every Quall."

"I think this all centers on what we saw in the valley," Talaza said. "I think it has to do with the Star Lord's recent coming and going. Perhaps they have made a pact."

Talaza noticed Tatute gently shake his head.

"The Star Lord's coming and this meeting, the bones say are separate," Tatute said.

"Chou and Flaxon borders have always been in contention," Makayass said. "We should not look for higher purpose when old scores are plainly being settled. The Chou gain their wealth from digging in the ground. Their tunnels are running dry of ore. Flaxon land will offer them new beginnings. They also covet the mountains where the Scarzen dwell. Spies tell me they seek access to the blue spirit crystal that the Scarzen guard within."

"Their ambition will see their annihilation should they draw Scarzen attentions in such matters," Talaza said.

Makayass nodded. "Chou clan numbers are swelling. They are simply running out of room. The fertile fields the Flaxon use to grow their crops are of

great interest to the Chou to feed their masses. All Kurja are not so different and covet each other's land. We Quall merely administer a balance from time to time."

"So you think the Chou want to start open war between the Scarzen and the Flaxon?" Analuke asked. "This means they intend to sift through the spoils afterward. They must have their head wrapped backwards if they can't see what result that will have."

"Wife, hold your opinion," Talaza said. "Forgive my wife, great Makayass. Her opinions are sometimes ... hard on wiser ears."

"Great Makayass," Analuke pressed. "The Scarzen are small in number by comparison to the other clans. Yet none have breached their bunker walls or broken them in open combat and returned the victor, not in the entire spoken history of the Quall. Scarzen power on the battlefield would see the Flaxon ground to meat paste should the Scarzen leave their border. Why do the Chou want to stir up such hostility? And what is to stop the Chou sweeping south to *our* mountain to look for the ore they value so much?"

Makayass sat back, considering Analuke's comment. "Not our concern, Analuke, for now," he said, tossing a glance to Tatute. "We have been paid well in advance with clink for the service we provide. Gather your best blades and may Hex grant your strokes cut true. Leave neither witness nor trace of your actions. You both depart at the setting sun. Should you encounter the Star Lord, treat them with reverence should they make demands of you. We know not their reason for being here."

Tatute stepped forward, raising his divining spear. "If you pass from form to light during the course of events, may Hex carry you to the greenest hunting ground."

Both Talaza and Analuke stood and paid respect. Then, just for a moment out of the corner of his eye, Talaza thought he saw a tall figure standing in shadow in the far corner of the room. He focused in on that

## Quall Assassin - Talaza's Contract

position, which made the others look too.

"Have you some concern, Blade Master?" Tatute asked.

Talaza's eyes crimped and he frowned upon seeing the space empty. He made no reply. A hand gently touched him on the upper arm.

"Talaza," Analuke said softly.

His attention brought back, Talaza turned to Makayass. "May I make a request of the clan elder?" Talaza asked.

"You may," Makayass said.

"Our sons, Sooza and Cezarn, are due for their rite of passage very soon. In the event I or my wife do not return, I ask that the house of Makayass show them sanctuary and guidance."

"You have the word of Makayass. It will be done."

"We shall not fail you, great Makayass," Talaza said.

He and Analuke paid respect again, then they turned and departed.

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Makayass watched the two leave before turning to Tatute. "Are you sure they will fulfill their part?" Makayass asked. "Will they encounter the stranger?"

"The bones were unclear on that question," Tatute said. "In my dream Hex told me the road would be treacherous and outcomes unexpected."

Makayass sighed. "Hex forever speaks in riddles. What does that mean?"

"Hex sees this world from a different place, and his wisdom is too deep for even the great Korta to fathom. Out of chaos comes order; this Hex guarantees. What is certain is, Hex's power grows. His aim for our part in his



greater plan is yet to be revealed."

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