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ONCE, WHEN HE had been just past his tenth year, one of Nermesa's instructors, a philosopher, had told the young heir to House Klandes, "Eternity is forever, but it is the minutes that change lives."

Standing in the court of Conan, King of Aquilonia, the captain finally thought that he understood just what the man had meant. While the great expanse of time itself might fill the discourses of the learned, for the common man—such as himself—a single moment's decision could mean an entirely different future, for good or ill. More to the point, there was never just *one* such decision. There was a series, each forever altering what might have been and ultimately complicating life to the point of utter frustration.

Or at least that seemed to be the case with Nermesa's life.

One such decision, nearly two years ago, had been to leave one of the oldest families in all Tarantia—Aquilonia's capital—to seek to join the military and serve the Cimmerian-born ruler of his beloved homeland. That had led to a number of drastic choices out in the western frontier, where more than once the tall, brown-haired son

of Bolontes had nearly lost his head to brigands and Picts. Another choice during that time had had to do with breaking his arranged betrothal to the Lady Orena Lenaro, the beautiful but cold woman to whom he had been engaged since childhood. From that had come her sudden decision to accept the proposal of the ambitious Baron Antonus Sibelio, a prominent trading rival of House Klandes.

And finally, there had been his acceptance a year prior of the offer by King Conan and General Pallantides not only to serve as a Black Dragon—one of the king's elite—but to be one of the very select to stay constantly on hand near Conan himself. The consequences of that were still being played out.

Of course, as Nermesa's blue eyes studied the throng of courtiers and diplomats, he wondered why the king even needed anyone nearby. Of those here to see the ruler of Aquilonia, there were only three of interest to Nermesa. One was the Nemedian ambassador, the snobbish, gray-haired Zoran. While with his garish, billowing robes and perfumed body, the man had an effete look to him, Nermesa had seen him handle a sword once during a duel with an Ophirian count with a reputation for a swift, able blade.

It had taken Zoran all of five seconds to break the man's guard and not only cut him through the heart but also across the throat for good measure.

At present, Zoran drank wine from a golden goblet while talking down his long nose at a squat local merchant who likely was trying to do his best to profit from the relaxed trade restrictions King Conan had just this evening announced. Nemedias had still not recovered from its failed invasion of Aquilonia some years past and in order to keep its eastern neighbor from collapsing—despite no love for King Tarascus by Conan *or* Queen Zenobia—the latter had finally negotiated a treaty opening up Aquilonia to Nemedian goods. Of course, in turn, the Nemedians needed to buy materials and foodstuffs that only Aquilonia could best supply, so matters still worked out to Tarantia's advantage.

Not far from the Nemedian ambassador was a bearded,

broad-shouldered man wearing a blue cloak over his leather-armored torso and clad in matching kilt with blue metal tips. Thomal Dekalatos was the ambassador from the city-state of Sarta, part of the land of Corinthia, just south of Nemedra. Although his basic style of dress was akin to several other figures there—all also ambassadors from one Corinthian city-state or another—not once through the evening had he mingled with his fellow countrymen. In a bold move, Sarta, located near one of the mountain passes leading to both Nemedra and Aquilonia, had finally taken advantage of their location to seize by arms the most valuable trade route. Once relatively obscure and of little military might, Sarta now threatened to become the dominant force in its native land and much of the credit or blame for that fell upon Lord Dekalatos' shoulders. It was said that he had been the one to engineer the plan, although some thought that he had had assistance. Now the other Corinthian states debated whether to join Sarta in a new league or rise up against it.

The third figure whom Nermesa eyed spoke with King Conan himself and was none other than Baron Antonus Sibelio. Although only a dozen or so years younger than Nermesa's father, the baron looked nearly the same age as the Black Dragon officer. Pale brown of hair and clean-shaven, he presented a regal figure in his rich, blue-and-black-colored silks. On one hand he wore his favored ring with the glistening emerald, surely worth a fortune in itself. As ever, clasping his wide cloak at the neck was a golden disk upon which had been embossed a heron with one leg raised. In the bird's talons, it held a sword which it looked prepared to expertly use. The crest of House Sibelio, a House once almost as obscure in Aquilonia as Corinthian Sarta, but now among the most influential.

As tall and as fit as the lupine Antonus was—Nermesa could not deny that Orena had chosen well after he had broken their betrothal—the baron was dwarfed by the Cimmerian. With his square-cut black mane and sun-browned countenance, Conan was clearly an outlander, something

that still rankled some of the older families of Aquilonia. He had been born up in the harsh, cold climes beyond Gunderland and the Border Kingdoms, a place of barbarians and mythic tales. His blue, smoldering eyes not only focused on the man to whom he spoke, but also surreptitiously studied every aspect of the chamber. The rich-yet-simple blue garments failed to mask his muscular build, the results of years as a mercenary, officer, and, as some whispered, a *thief*. Like all save the Black Dragons, Conan was unarmed, a fact made more noticeable by his hand, which kept slipping down to seek the hilt of the sword that usually hung there. Since the ambassadors could not come armed, the king had declared—much to the dismay of Queen Zenobia, General Pallantides, and Nermesa—that he would not wear a weapon, either.

“Crom!” the Cimmerian had declared when those protests had come from those most loyal to him. “Am I a cowardly knave among men that I’d carry a sword when they can’t?”

“But you are *ruler* of Aquilonia,” Pallantides, a dark-complexioned man of possible Ophirian origins had insisted. The vulpine-featured commander shook his head vehemently, his long, flowing black hair accenting his distress. “Whereas this lot *is* just a bunch of jackals seeking some meaty bone to gnaw upon . . .”

“We have much more to lose than they do,” had added the queen, a swarthy, dark-haired beauty from, of all places, Nemedi. As part of a harem, she had rescued Conan from his enemies. Seeing a spirit matching his own and certainly noticing her physical attributes, the Cimmerian had quickly announced her as his queen. They were an able pair, well matched in all ways. “I have much to lose,” she had concluded more pointedly.

But even her words fell on deaf ears. Conan resisted all arguments and so Pallantides countered his decision by adding half again as many men to watch over the occasion. An even bigger surprise to Nermesa than the king’s refusal to wear a weapon had been when his general had chosen

the heir to Klandes—one of the newest members of the Dragons—to command the contingent.

“After Khatak and the Picts, how could I trust anyone else more?” Pallantides had declared.

Of course, the general was there, too, standing with her majesty. One could have almost mistaken *them* for the royal couple. Pallantides was clad in his laced silver armor, the black, hissing wyrm on the breastplate marking him as leader of the elite knights. A rich purple cloak with silver lining draped over his shoulders nearly to the marble floor. Like the king’s, his narrow, brown eyes surveyed everything even as he attended to Queen Zenobia.

She was, in Nermesa’s estimation, one of the most arresting women that he had ever met. It was not simply her beauty or the curves that the green, silken gown accented to perfection. She also had a keen mind, one as quick as any man’s, including her beloved husband. Zenobia could match wits with any courtier or ambassador and come out the clear victor.

However, somewhere in the crowd was a woman of whom late Nermesa had found himself more intrigued than his queen. Once she had been to him only the mousy young sibling of Orena, yet now she was a woman herself and one who, in his opinion, far outshone her glamorous but arrogant sister.

Unfortunately, of Telaria Lenaro, he saw no sign. With her lush auburn hair and soft green eyes, she should have stood out, but the young lady-in-waiting was absent from Zenobia’s side.

But he *did* suddenly spy Orena. The features so similar to Telaria’s yet more defined had the opposite effect than the younger sister’s did on the captain. Even the eyes, the same in shape and color, held such a severity that he immediately turned from the statuesque blond woman rather than have their gazes accidentally meet.

In doing so, Nermesa suddenly found himself facing someone much associated with the Lady Lenaro but much more welcome.

The gray-eyed figure with the square jaw and very patient look was a Gunderman. Gundermen came from the northernmost part of the kingdom and were known for their trustworthy service to their employers, be that employer a noble such as Orena or the king of all Aquilonia. Everyone hired Gundermen. They were practical-minded and, as a people, had never risen up against the conquering Aquilonians. In fact, they even made up a good part of its army.

As was often the custom among his kind, this Gunderman had his long, fair hair bound behind him. He wore the blue-and-black uniform of a servant of House Sibelio even though when last the pair had met it had been the Lenaro family for whom he had worked as bodyguard. Of course, his true loyalty had not changed, for he had been—and still was—Orena's man.

"Good evening, my lord," the Gunderman murmured politely.

"It's good to see you, Morannus. How do you fare in your new dwelling and capacity?" Although Orena still held control of House Lenaro's holdings, she was very much now the Baroness Sibelio. Her personal belongings had been transferred to Antonus' outlying estate and her family home sealed up for the time being.

"I survive," Morannus said, with a hint of a smile. "The home of the baron *is* a bit more comfortable."

"And his own servants? There is no rancor?" Nermesa recalled one time when he had almost run afoul of the baron's own chief Gunderman, Betavio. The muscular bodyguard had the foul temper of a pit dog.

"My duty is to see to my mistress's needs," Morannus replied with a guarded expression. "Nothing else matters."

That, to the captain, meant that the two Gundermen did not get along. Not a surprise, when both were used to being in command of the rest of the household.

"May I extend my congratulations to you, my lord, for your posting. Well deserved. I always believed that you were destined for great things."

The admission from Morannus startled Nermesa, who

considered the man something of a friend despite the differences in their stations. "Thank you."

"A pity you and my mistress had a parting of the ways. I had high hopes for that union." The ponytailed Gunderman cocked his head. "But Klandes and Lenaro might yet be bound together, if what I hear has truth."

"I don't know what you mean," muttered the officer, certain that his face was reddening.

Morannus bowed his head. "I've overstepped my bounds! Forgive me—"

At that moment, there came raised voices from the direction where the knight had last seen Lord Dekalatos. Morannus stepped back as Nermesa, hand already on the hilt of his sword, turned to deal with the matter.

A balding Corinthian in green cloak and brown garments confronted Dekalatos. He had clearly had one cup of wine too many and was on the verge of striking the ambassador from Sarta. Nermesa made a quick study of the shouting man and recognized him as the representative from Tebes, the city-state most affected by Sarta's seizing of the pass.

"Your cutthroats are charging a monstrous toll now! This is the final straw! Remove them from the pass immediately, or Tebes will have to declare—"

"Be cautious, be wise," Dekalatos suggested. "Your words will be noted with the first hint of hostility clearly made by Tebes."

The second ambassador faltered, and his expression grew more adamant in its fury. "Spare me your 'kind' warning! I know what happened to Koron! He—"

As Nermesa rushed forward, he quickly glanced at the king and queen. Two Black Dragons stood with Conan and the baron, while Pallantides had pulled Zenobia from the crowd. Satisfied that the royal pair were safe, Nermesa interceded.

"My lords," he said confidentially to the two. "This is not an occasion for such disagreements. You are guests of his majesty!"

“Quite right, quite right,” replied Thomal Dekalatos. His hand strayed to a silver pin on the shoulder of his cloak. “As I was just telling the Count Stafano—”

“You were doing no such thing! I came here to talk reason, in a calm voice, and you told me to go prostate myself to your horse if I hoped to appease Sarta! You insult me so to my face at a royal affair!”

The Sartan piously looked around. “Did anyone hear me say such a base thing to this man? Anyone?”

No one, especially the other Corinthians, gave any indication of having heard the foul words. Most of them likely had not, but Nermesa suspected that Stafano’s countrymen would have denied hearing anything no matter the truth. Sarta now held that much of an upper hand over the rest of Corinthia.

“Come, my lord,” Nermesa quietly said to the enraged count, “There is some fine food over on the table yonder! Please partake of some of Aquilonia’s finest dishes . . .”

“Yes, do that,” the bearded Dekalatos urged politely.

Count Stafano’s eyes all but bulged. His face went red with renewed fury. “You—you *hear* him? By Mitra! I’ll have your throat for this!”

He ripped free from Nermesa, thick hands seeking his counterpart’s neck. Thomal Dekalatos started to back away, but not quickly enough. His one hand remained by his shoulder.

With trained reflexes, Nermesa not only regained his hold, but increased it. He pulled the count from his intended victim.

But at the same time, the Sartan’s hand pulled away from his shoulder . . . taking with it the pin. Like a viper, the hand darted forward and back in an instant.

Count Stafano let out a gasp of pain. Glancing at the man’s hand, Nermesa saw a tiny dot of blood form near the base of the thumb.

With his gauntleted hand, he grabbed the pin from Lord Dekalatos, but it was already too late. The count fell back into Nermesa’s arm. Another of the Black Dragons helped

the captain set the stricken Corinthian to a chair. Stafano's face was completely ashen.

"I—I—" he stammered.

The count fell back, and he let out a terrible groan. His tongue, now an ominous shade of purple, thrust out.

Count Stafano let out one last, feeble gasp, and stilled.

"You saw," Thomal Dekalatos calmly declared. "He was coming at me with murder in mind! The man was clearly in a deranged rage! I had no choice!"

Pallantides strode toward him. "But it is forbidden to bring a weapon of any kind in the presence of the king and queen at such an event! That pin is clearly poisoned."

"Merely a personal protection. And well needed, I might point out!" He thrust a finger toward Nermesa. "If that man had done his task as he should have, I wouldn't have been forced to such a drastic measure to save myself!"

More than one eye turned to Nermesa, who had already been berating himself for having missed the pin. True, no one could have guessed that the decorative piece could be so lethal, but as the officer in charge, any lapse was *surely* his responsibility.

"Nevertheless," continued Nermesa's commander, "I must ask that you come with me, my lord. Now." Pallantides reached out to take the Sartan's arm. "This matter must be dealt with."

Keeping out of reach of the general, the ambassador vehemently shook his head. "I am a citizen of Sarta and protected by my rank. Do not presume to treat me like a suspected brigand."

"No one is doing that, but you must—"

"Now, Thomal," came another voice from behind the Sartan. "Keep your head, man. The general's only doing his duty."

Keeping one hand on Lord Dekalatos' shoulder, Baron Sibelio came around in front of the man. Pallantides started to say something, but the baron turned to him first. "There's no need to make more of a scene out of this, is there, General?" He pulled his hand from the ambassador's shoulder.

“Thomal will cooperate as long as you respect his station, won’t you, Thomal?”

Lord Dekalatos stirred himself. “Yes. We of Sarta are not barbarians and butchers, as some would think us. This was unintentional, and I will personally compensate Stafano’s family if need be.”

He could hardly buy them a new Stafano, thought Nermesa, but from what he had seen of Corinthians’ greed, perhaps money *would* prove a more-than-adequate substitute for the late ambassador’s “loved ones.”

“Good man,” remarked Antonus. “General?”

“Thank you, Baron.” The commander of the Black Dragons waved back the two subordinates who had stepped up to assist him with the Sartan. “If you’ll come with me, my lord?”

“Of course.” Lord Dekalatos walked alongside Nermesa’s superior as if the two were about to embark on a companionable conversation.

Nermesa had other men quickly but respectfully remove the body of the late Teban representative. As Lord Stafano was brought away, Baron Sibelio quietly commented, “Not what you were hoping for tonight, was it? I’m sorry, Captain Nermesa.”

“I should’ve paid more attention. This is my fault.” He glanced in the direction of the king . . . only to find Conan eyeing him in turn.

The Cimmerian had his goblet to his mouth, but was not drinking. His eyes bored into Nermesa’s own and, in the Aquilonian’s mind, condemned the younger man’s ineptitude.

“You shouldn’t be so hard on yourself,” responded Antonus. “I’m sure no one else would.”

No one but my liege, the heir to Klandes thought, eyes still caught by those of King Conan.

The rest of the guests all stood silent, expectant. Conan abruptly tore his gaze from Nermesa and glanced around at the gathered guests. Without warning, he smiled broadly to them and at last drank.

The crowd suddenly became animated again. It was as if the fight between the Corinthians and the subsequent death of one had never occurred.

But as he excused himself from Baron Sibelio and once more took up his position, Nermesa knew that the repercussions of the terrible incident would play out for some time to come.

And he would certainly be at their center.