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“—AND LO, THE foul sorcerer, Xaltotun, who would have raised the ancient and monstrous land of Acheron up from the dead, was smote by magic more powerful than his! Shriv-eled, he became, once more, the mummified corpse raised by Aquilonia’s enemies! Smote by magic secured by the king, who had already escaped black Khitan assassins and Nemedian treachery!”

The tall, balding orator in flowing white robes gazed imperiously at the crowd in the open amphitheater. Torches lined the upper walls of the round stadium, which seated some two thousand. The orator’s lidded gaze and proud standing added emphasis to his remarkable baritone voice, perfect for effect for this particular tale . . . or so Nermesa, son of Bolontes, scion of House Klandes, thought as he listened, almost mesmerized.

One hand on the upper fold of his robe, the player continued, “And with Xaltotun no more, the betrayers quickly fell to the king and his men! Valerius, blood of the foul tyrant Nemedides and usurper of the throne, slain with his

followers by the sacrifice of those brave citizens who most had suffered torture during his short but terrible reign as king of our realm! For Valerius, a score of arrows to pierce his black heart and a sword to sever his head! Then fell Amalric, Baron of Tor, who found doom impaled in the heart on the lance of Pallantides, commander of Aquilonia's host! Lastly, Tarascus, who rumor has it only gained Nemedias's throne through the sorcerer's dark arts! Brought to his knees by none other than the king himself and spared life only in exchange for restitution to the peoples of Aquilonia and the release of she who now sits beside great Conan on the throne, our beloved queen, fair Zenobia!"

From the stone benches upon which they sat, the audience abruptly arose with several shouts of, "Hail, Conan, King of Aquilonia! Hail, Zenobia, Queen of Aquilonia!"

When the crowd had quieted again, the speaker concluded, "And so peace was brought to the realm! Aquilonia grew strong again, and our tale, for now . . . is ended . . ."

The listeners clapped. The robed figure bowed, then strode from the stage as if Conan himself. Musicians began a piece designed to prepare the audience for the next entertainment, a play concerning two young lovers from vying Houses.

But while most of the audience looked forward to the next piece, the young, brown-haired aristocrat seemed almost oblivious.

"Amazing . . ." muttered Nermesa, blue eyes round despite his having heard the story a dozen times before. He never ceased to enjoy hearing of the astounding events, even if they were only a little over four years old. At the time of their happening, he had been a youth still caught up in his learning, and so everything that had happened had taken on a larger-than-life meaning for him. Yet, now, even though he had just become an officer in Aquilonia's military, those events still guided his dreams and his very existence.

"Poor Valerius," mocked the grating voice of his companion, a dark-haired, bearded man with a squat, crooked nose that compared even more unfavorably against Nermesa's

well-angled one. "After all these times here listening to him ending up full of bolts I can't see him other than a red pin-cushion!"

Nermesa chuckled slightly at his servant's jest. Quentus might have been in the employ of House Klandes, but, having been assigned since a boy himself to the House's heir, was more of a friend despite their differences in status. Of course, Quentus never completely forgot his place and always urged Nermesa to do the same, for the latter's father considered rank and blood of the utmost importance in life. The son of Bolontes, however, generally ignored the servant's advice when it came to that subject.

"Are we staying for the play, this time, Master Nermesa?" But even as the ursine servant asked, the robed aristocrat stood. Quentus shook his head. "Of course not. Such a foolish question."

"I've got to prepare, Quentus. I received my orders."

"Eh?" Black eyes narrowed. "How's it I've heard nothing?"

Nermesa smiled again. "You'd have had to have been standing near the doors all day as I did. When the messenger came, I stopped him before he knocked and took them from him directly!"

"Are you saying that this here's something even your parents don't know yet?"

Now it was the noble's eyes that narrowed. "No, and that was the way I intended it. I wanted to wait until the last minute . . . when they couldn't put up a fuss."

Quentus grunted, his life as a servant having given him a much more basic perspective. "Oh, you think they'll not?"

His master grimaced, well aware that Quentus was likely correct but refusing to admit it entirely. "We'll see . . . we'll see."

HOUSE KLANDES RAN with order. Bolontes, his stern, patrician features clearly marking him as Nermesa's father, insisted it be so. As head, he oversaw all of Klandes' affairs,

including their vineyards, granaries, and smithies. Klandes had agreements with every facet of Aquilonia's government even though Bolontes himself kept some distance from King Conan.

Klandes was one of the oldest, most stable Houses in all the realm, and its bloodline had flowed through more than a few kings. Thus it was that, even though he outwardly wore a respectful face in the presence of his monarch, Bolontes did not entirely accept the outlander—a Cimmerian, no less—as such.

And to find out that his only son now intended to serve Conan and serve him willingly was nearly enough to tear asunder the mask the patriarch ever wore.

“How . . . could . . . this happen?” he demanded of Nermesa. “How could you do this?”

“I spoke with some friends close to General Pallantides, Father,” Nermesa quickly answered. “You shouldn't be too surprised! I've been taking training for so long—”

“As any son of House Klandes should! As any future master should! Not as the lackey of a barbarian conqueror!”

“I will be an officer in the Aquilonian military, Father! A proud tradition that our family has included for most of its existence!”

The gray-haired Bolontes sniffed, his expression turning imperious. At six-foot-three, Nermesa was taller than average, but his father was two inches taller, enabling the elder Klandes to gaze down at the son as if the latter were still a pimpled child barely out of his first decade.

“A proud tradition, when the military served Aquilonian kings.”

Nermesa would not let his father intimidate him. They stood in the great room of the Klandes residence, where each wall gave tribute to past lords of the family. Busts of ancestors from centuries past lined much of the chamber, and each seemed to join Bolontes in eyeing his son in disappointment. The painted marble heads looked so very lifelike that Nermesa did his best to focus only on his father, the true impediment. He did not need to feel as if gen-

erations of Klandes condemned him. It was enough that the immediately preceding one did.

“I suppose that you would have preferred Valerius to continue to reign, or even Namedides.”

“They were Aquilonian, at least . . .” But here, at last, Bolontes faltered. Even he had been no friend of either. Pursing his lips, Nermesa’s father turned and walked behind the large oak table he used to conduct most of his business. Scrolls covered the six-foot-wide table. Several quills and a flask of ink sat on the far left corner, Bolontes favoring that hand.

Nermesa, too, was left-handed, and he knew that it was likely the fact that he and his father were so similar in many ways that had them butting heads like two rams so often. Yet, when it came to what was best for their homeland, the two seemed quite far apart.

The banner of the House hung high behind Bolontes. A red lion in a golden field, with twin swords—also red—crossing over the rearing beast. That Klandes and the Cimmerian-born king both had the animal as their symbol—Conan’s a golden lion on a black field—made no impression on Bolontes. After all, the banner of Klandes went back centuries, whereas the current monarch’s went back only a few years.

“Understand me, my son. Aquilonia and our House are intertwined as no other clan is. A thriving realm means a thriving Klandes. That you’d wish to protect Aquilonia fills me with pride, but I have difficulty in seeing our home survive under this Conan. How many times has insurrection and war come to us since he took power? He draws danger to him! Is that the sort of ruler we need?”

“I will be leaving immediately, Father. I’d like to leave with your blessing.”

Bolontes adjusted the neck of his tunic, a sign that only Nermesa could have recognized as a hint of anxiety. He smoothed his cloak, red with a gold lining, before responding. “Immediately? A quick farewell to your mother and myself and off you go? That’s to be it?”

“I thought it best,” the younger Klandes insisted. “The better not to draw *this* out.”

“Ever thinking of your parents. And what, may I ask, do you plan to do about Orena?”

Mention of the name caused Nermesa to grit his teeth. “I’ve written a letter that should reach her just about now. I’d hoped you could speak with her, too . . . especially since it was you and her father who arranged our betrothal when she was born.”

“Lenaro is a House with a breeding almost as pure as our own! I chose the best marriage I could for my only child! Is that what this is? Are you running away from all your responsibilities? Klandes will end up in the hands of one of your cousins if something happens to you, you know. It would be better if at least you had already produced an heir . . .”

“My marriage to Orena will still take place. I told her so in the letter, Father. It’ll just be a little later.”

Bolontes planted both fists on the table, ignoring the parchments he crushed in the process. “You will be the end of me, my son.”

Nermesa began to turn. “Do I have your blessing?”

“Come back alive and in one piece.”

It was less than Nermesa had hoped for but more than he had expected. His father remained behind the desk, eyes unblinking. Nermesa nodded, then left the chamber.

Household guards came to attention, their red-and-gold tunics marking them as property of Klandes. Nermesa barely noticed them. His sandals clattered loudly on the shining marble floor that covered the entire ground level. The symbols of his House had been etched at great price in every tile.

From behind a fluted pillar burst his mother, Callista. Almost as tall as her son, she was a slim, handsome woman with just a touch of gray in her brown, upswept hair. Her alabaster gown, bound at the waist, trailed behind her. She had softer, rounder features than her husband, with full lips and a petite nose. If there was any similarity in looks with Nermesa, it was in the shape and hue of her blue eyes,

which matched even more closely those of the younger Klandes than the father's.

Those eyes were now red with tears. "Oh, Nermesa! Please don't be angry with him! He's being harsh with you in part because of me! He knows what it will mean to me for you to go! Please, don't leave in such a mood!"

Nermesa softened. "I'm not angry with Father or you, Mother. Just a little disappointed in him. I'm doing what I believe right, and I'm not leaving Klandes forever! *He* served for four years, remember?"

"Bolontes was a second son, Nermesa. If not for the death of his eldest brother, he would have stayed in the military . . . but when that happened, he chose the House over all else."

"I'll be all right, I promise." He kissed her on the cheek. "You needn't worry about me."

Callista returned the kiss on his forehead, as she had done since he was a child. "I will worry nonetheless. That is what a loving mother does." Her expression softened. "And when the time comes, I will speak with Orena."

It was an unexpected gift. "Thank you. I promise, I'll still live up to the betrothal . . . since I have to."

"She is quite a beautiful woman, Nermesa. Would it be that terrible? I know she can be a bit . . . autocratic . . . but, without sons, as eldest child, Orena *has* had to take on the reins of their House. She'll be giving up much when you two marry. Lenaro will be absorbed into Klandes, its name lost to history. Imagine if the reverse would take place. How would you react?"

"I understand what you're saying, Mother. As I told you, I'll be going through with the betrothal. Give me time to make my mark. I'll come back with more glory for House Klandes. That can only increase our prestige, aid our holdings, and even perhaps make me a bit more impressive in Orena's eyes."

"As if you weren't so already." Wiping away a tear, Callista added, "At least, whenever you come back to Tarantia, you can visit us."

“Naturally!”

He gave her a hug and another kiss on the cheek, then departed his home. Outside, Quentus was finishing packing Nermesa’s horse, a chestnut stallion . . . and *another* beside it.

Quentus’s own.

“What’s the meaning of this?” the noble demanded.

“I’ll be coming with you, good master. Think I’d be leaving you to the mercy of the military?”

“My father would never—”

“Your father arranged it all. Three days ago.” The bearded servant grinned. “Looks like he’s as good at keeping a secret as you are! He may not want you riding off, but if he couldn’t be stopping you, then he wanted someone to keep watch! Who better than me to do that, eh?”

Shaken, Nermesa gripped the other man by the shoulders. “Quentus, I’ll go speak with him! I never would’ve risked you so! I know you don’t have a choice, but to be forced into the military without—”

“Master Nermesa! I proposed that I be the one before he even had the chance to ask! You think I’ll be letting you go into battle without me around to save your hide?” He slapped the blade sheathed at his side.

In truth, Quentus handled a sword at least as well as the noble. Small wonder, since, as was common among the aristocracy, a trusted servant like him trained with their master. Nermesa had needed someone with whom to spar, and Quentus had proven perfect.

“But . . .” The protest died on his lips. He had thought himself so clever, yet both his father and servant had outwitted him.

Quentus held Nermesa’s horse while his master mounted. The servant then mounted his own beast, an older, brown stallion that the noble realized was not the horse that he had at first thought it was. “Is that one of my father’s steeds?”

“Yes, but a lesser one. Wouldn’t do for a humble servant to have a better animal than his master.”

“But why?”

“My lord Bolontes felt I might not keep pace with you in times of trouble if I rode my own mare.” In truth, Quentus’s own horse was more useful for carrying loads around in town. Stockier, she was not built for speed as a horse in war necessarily was.

Nermesa did not have to ask, but he knew that his father had used this horse to pay Quentus, the better to guarantee that the servant would indeed watch over the heir to Klandes. With each passing moment, Nermesa was feeling less and less clever.

He hoped that General Pallantides and the king would not find him so.

Although they had an estate outside of the city—as did most of the affluent Houses—Bolontes preferred to make his home more often in the clan’s original home in Tarantia itself. This allowed him to be more in touch with those elements upon whose business Klandes depended. Thus it was that only minutes after departing the gates, Nermesa and Quentus rode through the throng-filled streets of Aquilonia’s fabled capital.

Tarantia was the nexus of western civilization, a place where all came to learn, to marvel, to envy. A great, stone wall with battlements surrounded it, and four gateways—set at the compass points—allowed entrance from the surrounding plains. Tall marble structures dominated the interior, many of them the traditional blue and gold towers first built by the city’s founders. Tarantia was actually a more recent name, and some elders still called it *Tamar*, a name whose meaning Nermesa had never discovered. Most of the major buildings had a series of fluted columns marking their exteriors and stone roofs sharply slanted, with masterful carvings over the columned entrances.

Statues decorated buildings of particular purpose and also marked intersections named for famous personages of the past. As with the busts in Nermesa’s home, these were brilliantly painted. Life-size warriors and statesmen in colored garments watched over visitors and inhabitants alike in so real a manner that every now and then someone could

be caught stealing a glance at a statue as if feeling the marble eyes upon him.

The pair passed one of the massive, arched city gates just as a troop of breastplated Gundermen with long pikes resting on their shoulders marched out of the capital. Nermesa watched the unit with pride despite its consisting of the gray-eyed, tawny-haired fighters from the northern edge of the empire. Gundermen were not Aquilonians in the traditional sense; their home, Gunderland, had been seized early on in the realm's formation. The people of that land were of an independent nature, but were among the most trusted soldiers in all the military. There had never been anything resembling an insurrection in Gunderland. Men such as these had battled beside King Conan when he had saved Aquilonia from the sorcerer and traitors and held a place of honor with the Cimmerian-born leader.

Despite Aquilonia's presently being at peace, wary guards watched from a walkway near the top of the city wall, which extended all the way around the capital. The king did not take his victory four years prior as a sign to relax; no, Conan had a healthy distrust of his neighbors . . . and even some of his own people. It was something that any good monarch soon learned . . . if he lived long enough.

An Aquilonian knight rode past them. The nose guard on his helm, shaped like that of a dragon's muzzle, gave the mustached fighter a fearsome look. He wore chain under his breastplate and at his side hung a huge, scabbarded sword that Nermesa doubted he himself could have easily hefted. Yet, if all went as planned, Bolontes' son would soon be a member of this fabled order of defenders.

High buildings with iron-railed balconies overlooked the market through which Nermesa now passed. With the day well under way, people of all castes flocked the public area, making travel slow. In addition to many whose blood could be traced back to the same stock as Nermesa, there were more Gundermen—mostly acting as hired guards—and darker Poitainians, with whom Quentus shared some blood. There were brown-eyed Bossonians, often with bows

over their shoulders, and a wary-eyed figure in a cloak who might have been a Stygian. A group of short, stocky Argosseans had set up a tent of their own and now dickered with customers over pearls and golden goblets, perhaps brought from beyond the southern land of Zingara. Nermesa even saw a pair of yellow-skinned travelers in long gowns, who he had to assume came from Khitai. If so, they surely had committed some terrible offense in their homeland and been cast out by order of their god-emperor. Although their kind could be found in goodly numbers in such places as Stygia, few of the almost-mythic race came to far-off Aquilonia unless forced to by circumstance.

The market abounded with fresh produce, fish, meats, and products from within Aquilonia and beyond, even silks from the Khitans' homeland and beyond. Lush animal skins from Kush and copper trinkets from the Pictish lands were among some of the other unusual items to be found in the capital's market.

Nobles followed by slaves and servants wandered around, buying whatever struck their fancy. More serious figures in the garb of House officials picked and chose among the various wares, especially the foodstuffs, seeking what would please their lords. Freeborn citizens argued with sellers for every coin they could keep, their savings kept in tiny leather pouches clutched in one hand.

Several women of varying social status looked up with interest at Nermesa as he rode past, eventually causing his cheeks to burn. Having been betrothed for nearly all of his life, he had not had much interaction with women other than his mother and Orena.

Quentus chuckled. "Would that I had your face instead of this crag of mine . . ."

"You've had your share, so I've noticed."

"No complaints, but I'd be always willing to take what you've not had."

Nermesa returned his chuckle . . . then suddenly had to rein his horse to a halt as a group of riders bullied their way directly toward where the pair were located.

“Aside, you!” snarled a muscular guard in blue-and-black garb. A Gunderman by birth, he treated Nermesa as if the young noble were the outsider, even kicking at the latter’s horse to shove both out of the way.

Quentus, one hand slipping to his broadsword, immediately pulled in front of his master. Despite the Gunderman’s obvious skill and armored torso, the servant looked more than willing to take him on. “Treat my lord Nermesa so again, and I’ll be cutting that tongue of yours and feeding it to some Kushite as a delicacy!”

The guard snarled and reached for his own weapon, his four comrades following suit.

“There will be no need for violence,” clipped a cloaked figure whom the fighters obviously protected. “Be not so eager, Betavio, that you ignore the mark of a House so respected as that of Klandes embossed on the saddles of both men.”

Betavio bit back some retort, then bowed his head at his own master. “Forgive me, Baron Sibelio! You ordered haste, and I thought—”

“Wrongly.” The other noble rode up next to the Gunderman. “Now, apologize not to me, but rather to one I believe Nermesa Klandes himself.”

As the guard bowed his head to Nermesa, Bolontes’ son eyed the other aristocrat. He knew of House Sibelio, a far more recent but quickly ascending name among the nobility. Known in previous generations mostly as a rustic House in the agricultural lands north of Tarantia, it had, in this last generation, transformed itself into a capable competitor of Klandes . . . and mostly because of the man before Nermesa.

Baron Antonus Sibelio was perhaps a dozen years younger than Bolontes but looked closer in age to Nermesa. Sibelio was an athletic man with lupine features and black eyes that seemed to burn through the younger Klandes. Clean-shaven, with pale, brown hair, he resembled some of the emperors of old.

His garments marked his success in trading, the robes

made of rich, colored silk. His voluminous cloak was clasped around his neck by a gold disk bearing the House crest, a heron with one leg raised. In the bird's talons was held a ready sword.

Pulling himself from the baron's powerful gaze, Nermesa bowed his head. "I am honored to be known by the illustrious Baron Antonus Sibelio. Your reputation precedes you."

Sibelio smiled, resembling more the wolf than ever. "But it is the House of Klandes that is most illustrious of all and, to encounter its heir is *my* honor, to be sure." He snapped his fingers. "Betavio! Let us stand aside for Klandes, first among Houses . . ."

The guards began to make room for Nermesa, but the young noble's eyes were not on them. Instead, he noticed the glittering emerald on a ring worn by the baron. It captured Nermesa's attention the way it might have a magpie's. Bolontes' son felt drawn to it—

"I said the way is clear for us now, Master Nermesa . . ."

"Hmm?" He had not even noticed that Quentus had been talking to him. Belatedly nodding to the baron, Nermesa added, "Thank you for your kindness. May we meet again soon."

Baron Sibelio smiled graciously, revealing many teeth. "I am certain we shall . . ."

He led his guards away. Nermesa and Quentus rode on and only after a few minutes did Nermesa realize that he had been all but holding his breath.

"There's one to watch, my lord!" commented Quentus with a growl. "Ambitious to the core . . ."

"He's made much of his House. I won't fault him for that—" A building rose in the distance, and all thought of competing nobles vanished from Nermesa's mind. "There it is!"

His dark-haired companion grunted. "Aye. The palace. We see it all the time. You've got a good view from your balcony, remember?"

But to the Klandes heir it was much more than just a towering structure with high walls and the banner of the lion flying above. It was a place of power, the place from which he whom some called the lion watched over all Aquilonia.

“The palace . . .” he breathed. “King *Conan*.”