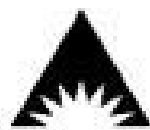


AGE OF
CONANTM
HYBORIAN ADVENTURES

A SOLDIER'S QUEST
Volume II

**THE EYE
OF CHARON**

Richard A. Knaak



ACE BOOKS, NEW YORK

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FALL INTO DARKNESS

Nermesa chopped apart his inhuman adversaries without pause. Much to his distress, though, his armor grew heavy, his legs weary. Yet there was still no end in sight to the demon's woodland horde.

He struggled up a ridge, the upward path slowing his pace, enabling the monstrous imps to gain on him. Several grabbed hold of his legs, his torso, and wrapped around his helmet, obscuring his vision. Unable to see exactly where he was going, Nermesa waved his weapon about wildly.

Then his left foot touched not earth but air. He toppled forward, still in the clutches of his inhuman adversaries. Nermesa frantically swung the sword, determined to fight until the end.

His helmet slipped from his head. A moment later, Nermesa's skull impacted against something harder than it . . .

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THE EYE OF CHARON

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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 Lenara, the beautiful but cold woman to whom he had been engaged since childhood. From that had come his 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 what 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, abiding 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 Nemedi. 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 Nemedi 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's 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 favorite ring with the glistening emerald, surely worth a fortune in itself. As ever, claspng 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-crowned black mane and sun-browed 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 any 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 bones 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 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 his head. 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 mo

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 g

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? E 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 is 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 the 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.

NERMESA WAS NOT summoned to answer for his failure the next day nor the day after that. In fact, General Pallantides acted as if all were well between them and that he was not deeply disappointed in the young officer's abilities and conduct.

Somehow, that only made Nermesa feel more concerned. When his punishment did come, he expected it to be more severe, even possibly dismissal from the Black Dragons. The heir to Klandis was not certain he could live with such shame. More important, he was not certain that his parents, and especially his father—who had served in the military with distinction and honor—could either.

That made it all the more difficult to meet with them this day.

The banner of his House hung high above as Nermesa reached the walled gates. Upon the banner's golden field reared a red lion with twin swords—also red—crossed over the beast. When Conan had seized the crown from the despot Namedides and placed his own lion on its black field on the flag over the palace, Bolontes had actually considered changing the generations-old emblem of his clan, simply so no one would think it linked at all to this upstart usurper. Fortunately, he had never followed through, and in the time since his son had willingly gone to serve the Cimmerian, the elder Klandis had mellowed to the point of respecting his king.

Nermesa prayed for some of that calm as he handed a servant the reins of his horse. He trotted up the marble steps and past the fluted columns, where a House guard saluted him and opened the door for him.

In the wide, marbled corridor within, his mother, Callista, met him. A tall, handsome woman with a slight hint of gray in her bound, brown hair and clad in a favored alabaster gown, she hugged her son tightly.

“How are you, Nermesa? Have they rectified that frightful problem with the Corinthians? Has Pallantides said anything about it to you?”

“Nothing yet, Mother.” He peered past her at a doorway farther down. “Is Father in the great room?”

“Yes, he had much work to do. Things are not all well with our holdings.”

It was what Nermesa feared. “I can't stay long. I'd better go talk with him immediately, then.”

“Try to keep him calm,” his mother pleaded, kissing him on the cheek. “It's always wonderful to see you.”

Nermesa marched up to the doors to his father's study, where a servant stood at attention. “Don't bother to announce me. I'm sure he knows that I'm here.”

“Yes, Master Nermesa . . .” The balding man opened the way.

The great room was not only where Bolontes, head of House Klandes, did his work, but also something of a shrine to the clan's lengthy history. Each wall paid tribute to its past patriarchs and members of note. Lifelike, painted busts of Nermesa's grandfather, great-grandfather, and many

others sat proudly atop marble stands. To the right, the captain noticed the bust of his father's elder brother, whose death had forced Bolontes to take on the reins of the House. The family resemblance was there in both brothers, as it was in Nermesa. The eyes, the well-angled nose, the proud patrician features, almost unchanged despite the centuries. Both men were over six feet, tall even for many of their race; but Bolontes was yet another two inches more than his son, ever making Nermesa feel like a child.

The elder Klandes had risen at the entrance of his only child. He gave Nermesa a nod and a quick survey. "The armor of the Black Dragons suits you well." He eyed the plumed, visored helm in his son's arm, the sleek, black breastplate with the small but savage dragon embossed on the center. Nermesa was armored from head to toe as if ready to do battle—which, as one of the king's elite, he had to be. At the slightest call of the horns from the towers of the palace, the younger Klandes had to race back to defend his lord. "As I thought it would."

"Thank you, Father."

Bolontes had never much been one for physical greetings, but since his son's near death fighting the witch Khati's Picts and bandits, that had changed. Clad in his white tunic and red, gold-lined cloak, he came around and strongly hugged his son. "Good to see you."

"I told Mother that I can't stay long. I'm certain that the general will be asking for me. There was some hint earlier."

"And you think it has to do with what happened at the gathering." The gray-haired Bolontes frowned. "A grim business, that, and naturally convoluted, dealing with ambassadors, of course."

"Yes. But no one will speak against the Sartan, especially the other Corinthians," Nermesa explained. "I suspect that Lord Dekalatos will be sent home, reprimanded, then returned here as if nothing happened."

His father snorted. "And some wonder why I never sought to enter the political arena. Running Klandes is battle enough."

Nermesa eyed the documents on the huge oak table that served as the elder Klandes' desk. More than one quill lay discarded on the side and a second bottle of ink sat un-stoppered, clear evidence of the long day's work. "You asked me here to discuss our business and to sign some agreements?"

"Yes, as my heir, you already have a say in several of our ventures, and to have both our marks on the documents will guarantee our word even more."

The son's brow arched. "*Your* mark isn't enough for some?"

"Of late, no." Bolontes guided Nermesa around the desk, then reached for one of the parchments. Nermesa immediately saw that it was a new agreement between his House and their partners in the granaries. He read it over quickly, his eyes narrowing at the changes. "Concessions? We've less control over the granaries than in all previous agreements."

"It's a unified demand . . . or they make a new agreement with House Sibelio."

"Sibelio . . ."

"The good baron's everywhere we are, Nermesa, undercutting our prices, offering incentives . . . it's a wonder the man is making any profit at all, but, by Mitra, he seems to be."

“He has contacts in Ophir, Nemedra, Brythunia, and as far away as Kush, as I understand it, Father.” Nermesa rubbed his chin. “He was very helpful and considerate during the chaos at the gathering. He always so.” The captain gritted his teeth. “No, not always. Not when Orena’s with him . . .”

Bolontes made a face. “A woman scorned, my son. I won’t ask you again why you broke off with her, but I do admit I wish it had been otherwise.”

Trying to stifle his growing anger, Nermesa pretended to reread the agreement. Orena had planned this well, as she always had everything. His leaving her had been the first time she had been caught on guard, and she was determined to make him pay. He had originally assumed that she had married the ambitious baron both to spite him and gain more prestige, but Nermesa had realized too late that Orena had intended to use her husband’s influence and wealth to seek revenge. Face-to-face, Antonus had never treated his rival with anything other than respect and friendliness, but to placate his bride he intended to ruin the entire Klandes family.

“It has to stop,” muttered Nermesa.

“What’s that?”

The son steeled himself. “I’ll talk to Orena. I’ll settle this with her.”

“Maybe you can use Telaria as a mediator,” suggested Bolontes, studying Nermesa. “Unlike her sister, she still seems to have quite a fondness for you.”

“I’d rather not include her in this. This is between Orena and me.”

His father said no more about it, but Nermesa could not help suspect that Bolontes knew the truth. The breaking point between him and his betrothed had been when he had discovered her beating his younger sibling. That was also the reason that Nermesa had pushed for the queen to take Telaria Lenaro on as a lady-in-waiting.

The situation with Orena could wait for the moment, though. Despite his determination to end the feud, the officer knew that he had to sign the papers his father presented him. Any delay to do so would further endanger the dealings of House Klandes.

Dipping one of the unbroken quills in ink, Nermesa signed under the seal of the House as his father had done. Like the senior Klandes, he was left-handed, unusual in Aquilonia.

“These also,” Bolontes said, handing him two other parchments. They were of a similar nature to the first.

Nermesa set down the quill. “I’ll speak with Orena as soon as possible.”

“I doubt that she will even see you, my son.”

Nermesa considered. “If I talk to the baron separately first, he might arrange a meeting with her.” He cursed himself for not having known of these most recent matters before having run into the baron at the gathering. Antonus had given no sign of his latest dealings, and even Morannus had hinted at nothing. But then, Orena had a way of readily controlling *most* men. “I think he’ll do it.”

Not looking quite convinced, Bolontes nonetheless remarked, “Perhaps undercutting us so much is hurting him more than I imagine. See what you can do.” He stacked the documents. “How fares the trading agreement the Cimmerians negotiated? Will it stand after the Corinthian trouble?”

“It should. Ophir, Nemediā, and Brythunia have expressed no reservations, and the last I heard from General Pallantides, Lord Dekalatos insisted that what happened would not change the decision made in the name of his king. No matter their hatred for Sarta, I believe most of the other city-states will fall into line. To do otherwise would be to provoke war between them.”

“Let us pray to Mitra that they keep sensible. That agreement opens many new vistas for us in Nermesa. Klandes would profit well by its adoption.”

Nermesa patted his father on the shoulder. “All will go well. You’ll see! All will go well . . .”

IT PROVED TO be the worst prediction Nermesa had ever made.

The trading agreement began to unravel but two days later. It came not, as the captain would have supposed, from the incident between Sarta and Tebes, but rather from the southeast, between Ophir and Koth. Accusations flowed from the latter that their caravans, which had to depart from the city of Khorshemish, were being waylaid south of the Karpash Mountains before being able to enter Aquilonia. Blood between the two realms had long been bad. Koth’s previous king, Strabonus, had perished after he and Ophir’s ruler, Almarus, had both attacked Conan’s realm. Koth’s current lord, Strabonus’ nephew, Gorald, believed that his uncle had been betrayed by the Ophirians despite the fact that Almarus had also been slain. The missing caravans had merely brought the matter to a head.

And as the ambassadors of both kingdoms flung accusations at one another, Brythunia declared that it, too, had lost caravans, these traveling through Nemediā and Corinthia. With a barely concealed sneer, Zoran suggested that it was odd that nearly everyone else had lost good numbers of men and merchandise and that Aquilonia should consider itself very fortunate not to have had much in the way of such troubles. The fact that he had said so in the presence of King Conan made it all the more remarkable that he still lived, for the Cimmerian was known to be very proud of his reputation for honor.

Over the following month, the king and his trusted advisors sought any way they could to keep the trade agreement alive. In the end, though, it was Baron Sibelio of all people who managed to at least keep the parties from withdrawing, even if actually accepting the proposal now appeared questionable.

Nermesa had no chance to speak with the baron, for the very day after the captain visited his father, Pallantides assigned him to oversee the patrols. This meant that Nermesa spent much of his time beyond the gates of the palace making certain that order was kept in the near vicinity. It was not enough for the Black Dragons to defend their monarch should someone breach the palace; the general preferred that any assassins not even make it over the outer walls.

It did not take long for Nermesa to ascertain that all was in order, but his duties insisted that he constantly recheck each post. On the trek from one to the next, he himself studied every person and building around him as if all might be of a suspicious nature. Having failed King Conan and Pallantides once, Nermesa would not do so again. He saw this task as a chance to redeem himself in their eyes.

It was no simple task, either. Around him swarmed people from a dozen lands and more. Tarantia was the pinnacle of civilization. Here pilgrims came to learn and to marvel, scholars came to debate, and merchants came to buy and sell. The capital of Aquilonia was surrounded by a great stone wall

with battlements and four gateways allowing entrance from the vast, surrounding plains. Originally known as Tamar—and still called so by some of the most elderly—it was a place dominated by tall marble towers, many of them painted in the traditional blue and gold. The majority of buildings, whether towers or not, had entrances flanked by high, fluted columns and great bronze doors. Over those entrances hung brilliant carved reliefs of heroes and mythic beasts.

Tarantia was also filled with statues, so many that a young Nermesa had once wondered if they outnumbered the living. They were most often found standing before the steps of public structures and were generally of past important citizens involved with that particular place. Others raised in more open venues consisted of famous generals, past kings still admired, and the like. All were painted to appear very lifelike, even to the strands in their garments and the color of their eyes. Often, people would glance in the direction of one, feeling as if that figure stared down at them. Even Nermesa, born and raised in Tarantia, more than once found himself meeting the gaze of this statue or that.

The palace itself, situated behind him on somewhat of a hill, was a towering, walled edifice with battlements. The banner of King Conan fluttered atop many points, including the palace's own highest towers, the tallest in all Aquilonia. Guards walked the outer walls of the king's residence, most of them Black Dragons like him.

Not all that far away from the palace stood another tower, an ominous dank leviathan whose upper windows at night gave it the semblance of some terrible demon's visage. The Iron Tower was where the worst criminals were imprisoned. Originally built as a keep, it had, under the tyrant Nemedides, been a feared place into which many enemies of the king had vanished. Under Conan, it now served a more noble purpose, but still the captain was never very comfortable around it.

Nermesa paused at the vast stone bridge over the Khorotas River, watching briefly as boats laden with Aquilonia's best goods headed south toward Argos. It did not surprise him at all that the three largest bore the armed heron of Sibelio.

Beyond the post where five Black Dragons stood watch, Nermesa spotted a contingent of breastplated Gundermen, a part of the normal City Guard. One of the men reminded him of Morannus, which gave Nermesa an idea. Perhaps he could speak to Morannus alone and convince him to whisper in the ear of Orena. The Gunderman was one of the few who might have influence over her. Of course, it likely went against the bodyguard's loyalty even where Nermesa was concerned, but at present that was the only notion the captain had.

As usual, the crowd was a mix of many types, from short, broadly built Argossean traders to swarthy Bossonian archers in their traditional brown-and-green forest garb. Like the Gundermen, the Bossonians made up a large and valuable part of the kingdom's military. Nermesa had met several of their kinsmen in the Marches, located just east of the Pictish wilderness and a natural buffer against incursions by the tattooed barbarians of the west. They were trustworthy fighters and good men. Many of them had sacrificed themselves against the Picts, Nemedians, and other foes in the name of King Conan.

Nermesa had just begun to leave the area of the bridge when he saw another Black Dragon approaching on horseback. The long blond hair and jutting chin told him that it could only be Paulo, a member of the fabled unit for even less time than Nermesa. Their relative newness in the ranks had brought them together as friends. In some ways, Paulo reminded Nermesa of a more noble-born friend, Quentus, his servant and good companion who had joined the military with the young Klandes, only

be gruesomely killed in the west.

“There you be!” called the other knight, eyes brooding. “Been looking all over for you, I have. Paulo hailed from a northern part of Aquilonia near the Border Kingdoms, but his accent and manner of speech were due to his mother’s being from some still more northerly land.

Paulo’s grim manner immediately put Nermesa on highest alert. Gripping the hilt of his sword—sword given to him as a gift for meritorious duty by Conan himself—the captain asked, “What is it? Has something happened to his majesty?”

This momentarily brought a grin to the blond knight’s ugly face. “Always worried about him, aren’t you? No, nothing like that! Himself wants to see you!”

“Himself” was how some of the other Black Dragons referred to Pallantides . . . at least when the general was not within earshot.

Nermesa grimaced. It was too soon to hope that he had made amends for the earlier debacle. Surely Pallantides had decided on some even lower post for him as further punishment.

The pair returned to the palace, where the general actually stood waiting for Nermesa. The young Klandes prepared for the worst.

“There you are! About time, Captain Nermesa! Don’t go far away, Sir Paulo. This concerns you as well.”

“Me?” The blond knight gave Nermesa a quick glance that seemed to condemn his friend for somehow drawing him into his troubles.

“Give your horses over to someone else and come with me.”

Doing as commanded, the pair followed Pallantides deep into the palace. Even with his limp—the result of a much harsher injury at the Battle of Valkia—the tall commander nearly outpaced the two younger men. As they walked the long, marble halls, Nermesa sought to keep his mind off his imminent fate by eyeing the various reliefs lining the walls. Some were of past kings and their accomplishments, but many were new and dealt with the colored-yet-admirable past of Aquilonia. Conan, the Cimmerian-born monarch. There was Conan against Xaltotun, the undead wizard. Conan leading his army against the Nemedians. Conan and the Black Dragons fighting off King Strabonus. The king himself, slaying some monstrous serpentlike creature. And on and on.

They were the pet project of Queen Zenobia, a woman very intent on reminding all of the exploits of her husband. More than once in the past, many Aquilonians had seemed to forget what the former mercenary had done for them, thus allowing pretenders and outsiders to wreak havoc on the kingdom. Zenobia sought to have this never happen again, and she was aided in her efforts by Pallantides, Count Trocero, and Sir Prospero of the southwestern province of Poitain—an area ardently supporting Conan—and even Publius, the heavysset high councilor and chancellor.

But while the reliefs reinforced Nermesa’s admiration for his lord, they also served to remind him of his failure. That failure further magnified when he realized just where they were heading.

King Conan had been born in a vast, untamed land, and so, even after many years among the “civilized” peoples, sometimes he acted as if the walls closed in on him. The Black Dragons understood and respected this, for they saw their liege as the great cat he utilized as his symbol. The

palace was a beautiful cage, a necessary evil, and, like a caged lion, Conan *had* to pace it or find a place where he could at least pretend he was out in the open. Thus it was that he spent much time alone or with Zenobia on the wide, banistered balcony that gave him the best view of the rolling plains and woods north of Tarantia. It was always the balcony facing north, even if in the opinions of some the views in other directions were more breathtaking.

There was no need for Pallantides or the guards on duty at the entrance to announce them. Conan had apparently known of their presence long before they reached the entrance, for he had already turned to face them.

“About time, Pallantides,” he remarked gruffly. Under a stern brow, he eyed the other two. “Captain Nermesa. Sir Paulo.”

Next to Nermesa, the other knight swallowed in surprise. The king seemed to know the name of every man serving him, even if that man had not been with him long. In Nermesa’s mind, it was yet another reason why Conan commanded such loyalty. Those willing to die for him were not simple nameless drones; they were brothers in arms.

“The delay was unavoidable, your majesty,” returned the general. Neither he nor the men with him knelt before Conan. Public affairs demanded such protocol lest outsiders think the king’s followers respected him little, but, in private, the former soldier felt it demeaning to his men.

Conan grunted. “Get on with it, then.”

“As you command.” When it came to the Black Dragons, the king often let Pallantides relate his wishes. The king would interject when he thought necessary. “What I say is for your ears alone. Even those you travel with must not know the full extent. Understood?” When both men nodded, Pallantides continued, “Captain Nermesa. Sir Paulo. The trade agreement teeters on the brink of failure. With it, the king hoped to build a common need among the lands, one that might stave off future bloodshed. Without it, we are certain to face new conflicts with many of our neighbors, something which *cannot* even if victory is ours in each case, be good for Aquilonia in the long run.”

The two knights quickly glanced at one another. They knew what stock Conan put in the agreement and its passing. How, though, did that affect them?

“Captain Nermesa. You know the reports of missing or slaughtered caravans coming from nearly every realm. Even Nemedra has evidence that their people were slain . . . and after they had brought their goods to Tarantia and headed back laden with valuables purchased here. Those cases mirror most of the others dealing with Aquilonia itself.”

The suggestion was clear. If most of the lost wagons had only recently left inner Aquilonia, then they gave the appearance that their country was at least in part responsible for the crimes.

“If I may,” remarked Nermesa, recalling something. When General Pallantides indicated he should go on, the captain said, “My own House—and I believe that of the Baron Sibelio—have both reported lost men and goods, too. Aquilonia is not untouched, as some might claim.” He did not mention any name, but knew that all would think of the Nemedian ambassador, Zoran, and his foul words.

“All lost within the borders of Aquilonia and far less in total value than what many of our neighbors reported.” The general looked to the king. “Though not unconsidered, yes, your majesty?”

“We’ve lost few, but even one is too much.” Conan turned to face the north again. “Too much when

you're a king."

Nermesa knew that he was speaking more about the lives than the valuables. "How may we serve your majesty?"

The muscular king looked back, but it was Pallantides who answered. "There is a caravan leaving for southern Nemedi. Zoran plans to go with it, bearing with him missives for King Tarascus. Zoran's personal guard is good, but too small under the circumstances. There are also men accompanying the caravans, but they are mostly hirelings of the House owning the wagons. King Conan has offered a contingent of the Black Dragons to ride with the caravan—using the ambassador as part of the reason—and the owner has agreed."

So Nermesa was to be a guard for an arrogant foreigner, little better than the man's own help. It pained him that Paulo and other comrades had to share his misfortune.

But then, Pallantides added, "That is your *official* capacity. What the king truly desires—and what his majesty is placing you, Captain Nermesa, in charge of—is finding out the truth about the charges."

The captain straightened. "Sir?"

"We need a trusted man who's experienced commanding in the field, someone who's adaptable. His majesty decided on you."

Nermesa looked to the king, who nodded grimly. "I will not let you down this time!" Bolontes' son blurted. "I swear!"

"No one here thinks that you did that evening, Nermesa." The corner of Pallantides's mouth curled up. "But I'm certain that Zoran and many others do. They will misjudge you. The king is interested to find out what their error in judgment might cause to happen. What it might reveal about the attacks."

He had not disappointed his lord after all! Nermesa tried to stay focused, but *hearing* that with King Conan standing before him and thus giving it validity almost overwhelmed the young Klandes.

But it would not do to create another disaster by not paying attention. He listened carefully to the general's final words.

"Captain Nermesa, you will treat Zoran very respectfully and not take anger at any words he or anyone else in the caravan may say about the Teban ambassador's death. You must pretend to know your place. Sir Paulo, I've seen you fight alongside the captain and have recommended to his majesty that you would be a good second." It was a promotion for the newest member of the elite unit, and Paulo thrust out his already-prominent jaw in a smile. Returning his attention to Nermesa, the veteran officer added, "Watch and listen. Should you make it to Nemedi without incident, you will travel back with the next caravan. We have the word of the owner that it will take a trail leading it along where the last caravan was likely ambushed. Investigate all you can, but at the same time, I expect you to do your part to keep the wagons and their drivers safe. Is everything clear?"

"Aye, General."

"You may decline this mission if you like. This is beyond the dictates of the Black Dragons—" He nodded proudly when Nermesa immediately shook his head. "As I thought. You have a good head on your shoulders."

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