



THE
ELVEN NATIONS
TRILOGY

VOLUME TWO

THE
KINSLAYER
WARS

DOUGLAS HILES



Prologue

Winter, Year Of the Ram, 2215 (PC)



“The emperor arrives—he enters the fortress at the South Gate!”

The cry rang from the walls of Caergoth, blared by a thousand trumpets and heard by a million ears. Excitement spread through the massive tent city around the great castle, while the towering fortress itself fairly tingled with anticipation.

The carriage of Emperor Quivalin Soth V, sometimes called Ullves, rumbled through the huge gates, pulled by a team of twelve white horses, trailed by an escort of five thousand men. From every parapet, every castellated tower top and high rampart in sprawling Caergoth, silk-gowned ladies, proud noblemen, and courtiers waved and cheered.

Sheer, gray-fronted walls of granite towered over the procession, dominating the surrounding farmlands as a mountain looms over a plain. Four massive gates, each formed from planks of vallenwood eighty feet long, barred the sides of the great structure against any conceivable foe—indeed, they proudly bore the scars of dragonbreath, inflicted during the Second Dragon War more than four centuries earlier.

The interior of Caergoth consisted of winding avenues, tall and narrow gates, stone buildings crowded together, and always the high walls. They curved about and climbed in

terrace after terrace toward the heart of the massive castle, forming a granite maze for all who entered.

The carriage trundled through the outer gatehouse with imperial dignity and rolled along the streets, through open gates, and down the widest avenue toward the center of the fortress. Banners, in black and deep red and dark blue, hung from the ramparts. Everywhere the cheering of the crowds thundered around the emperor's coach.

Outside the walls, a vast sea of tents covered the fields around the fortress, and from these poured the men-at-arms of the emperor's—army some two hundred thousand in all. Though they did not mingle with the nobles and captains of the fortress, their joy was no less boisterous. They surged toward the castle in the wake of the emperor's procession, their shouts and hurrahs penetrating the heavy stone walls.

Finally the procession entered a broad plaza, cool and misty from the spray of a hundred fountains. Beyond, soaring to the very clouds themselves, arose the true wonder of Caergoth: the palace of the king. Tall towers jutted up from high walls, and lofty, peaked roofs seemed distant and unreachable. Crystal windows reflected sunlight in dazzling rainbows, filtering and flashing their colors through the shimmering haze of the fountains.

The coach rumbled down the wide, paved roadway to the gates of the palace. These portals, solid silver shined to mirrorlike brilliance, stood open wide. In their place stood the royal personage himself, King Trangath II, Lord of Caergoth and most loyal servant to the Emperor of Ergoth.

Here the royal coach halted. A dozen men-at-arms snapped their halberds to their chests as the king's own daughter opened the door of the gleaming steel carriage. The crowd surged across the plaza, even through the pools of the fountains, in an effort to see the great person who rode within. Around the plaza, from the surrounding walls and towers, teeming thousands shouted their adulation.

The emperor's green eyes flashed as he stepped from the high vehicle with a grace that belied his fifty years. His beard and hair now showed streaks of gray, but his iron will had hardened over his decades of rule until he was known, truthfully, as a ruthless and determined leader who had led his

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people into a prosperity they had never before known.

Now this regal leader, his robe of crimson fur flowing over a black silk tunic trimmed in platinum, ignored the King of Caergoth, stepping quickly to the three men who stood silently behind that suddenly embarrassed monarch. Each of these was bearded and wore a cap and breastplate of gleaming steel plate. Tall boots rose above their knees, and each held a pair of gauntlets under his arm as he waited to greet the most powerful man in all of Ansalon.

The shrieks of the crowd reached a crescendo as the emperor seized each of these men, one after the other, in an embrace of deepest affection. He turned once more and waved to the masses.

Then Quivalin V led the three men toward the crystal doors of the king's palace. The portals parted smoothly, and when they closed, the hysteria beyond fell to a muted rumble.

"Find us a place where we can speak privately," the emperor commanded, without turning to look at King Trangath.

Immediately that royal personage scuttled ahead, bowing obsequiously and beckoning the emperor's party through a towering door of dark mahogany.

"I hope fervently that my humble library will suit my most esteemed lord's needs," the old king huffed, bowing so deeply he tottered for a moment, almost losing his balance.

Emperor Quivalin said nothing until he and the three men had entered the library and the doors had soundlessly closed behind them. A deep black marble floor stretched into the far corners of the huge room. Above them, the ceiling lofted into the distance, a dark surface of rich, brown wood. The only light came from high, narrow windows of crystal; it fell around them as beams of heat and warmth before its reflections vanished in the light-absorbent darkness of the floor.

Though several soft chairs stood along the walls, none of the men moved to sit. Instead, the emperor fixed each of the others with a stare of piercing strength and impelling command.

"You three men are my greatest generals," Quivalin V said, his voice surprisingly soft beneath the intensity of his gaze. "And now you are the hope and the future of all humankind!"

The three stood a little taller at his words, their shoulders growing a trifle more broad. The emperor continued. “We have borne the elven savagery long enough. Their stubborn refusal to allow humans their rightful place in the plains has become too much to bear. The racial arrogance of their Speaker has turned diplomacy into insults. Our reasonable demands are mocked. Silvanesti intransigence must be wiped out!”

Abruptly Quivalin’s gaze flashed to one of the trio—the oldest, if his white beard and long hair of the same color were any indication. Lines of strain and character marked the man’s face, and his short stature nevertheless bespoke a quiet, contained power.

“Now, High General Barnet, tell me your plans.”

The older warrior cleared his throat. A veteran of four decades of service to this emperor—and to Quivalin IV before him—Barnet nevertheless couldn’t entirely calm himself in the face of that august presence.

“Excellency, we will advance into the plains in three great wings—a powerful thrust from the center, and two great hooks to the north and south. I myself will command the central wing—a thousand heavy lancers and fifty thousand sturdy footmen with metal armor, shields, and pikes. Sailors and woodsmen from Daltigoth and the south, mainly, including ten thousand with crossbow.

“We shall drive directly toward Sithelbec, which we know is the heart of the elven defense—a place the elven general must defend. Our aim is to force the enemy into combat before us, while the northern and southern wings complete the encirclement. They will serve as the mobile hammers, gathering the enemy against the anvil of my own solid force.”

High General Barnett looked to one of his co-commanders. “General Xalthan commands the southern wing.”

Xalthan, a red-bearded warrior with bristling eyebrows and missing front teeth, seemed to glower at the emperor with a savage aspect, but this was simply an effect of his warlike appearance. His voice, as he spoke, was deferential. “I have three brigades of heavy lancers, Excellency, and as many footmen as Barnett—armored in leather, to move more quickly.”

Xalthan seemed to hesitate a moment, as if embarrassed, then he plunged boldly ahead. “The gnomish artillery, I must

admit, has not lived up to expectations. But their engineers are busy even as we speak. I feel certain that the lava cannons will be activated early in the campaign.”

The emperor’s eyes narrowed slightly at the news. No one saw the facial gesture except for Xalthan, but the other two noticed that veteran commander’s ruddy complexion grow visibly pale.

“And you, Giarna?” asked the emperor, turning to the third man. “How goes the grandest campaign of the Boy General?”

Giarna, whose youthfulness was apparent in his smooth skin and soft, curling beard, didn’t react to his nickname. Instead, he stood easily, with a casualness that might have been interpreted as insolence, except there was crisp respect reflected in his expression as he pondered his answer. Even so, his eyes unsettled the watchers, even the emperor. They were dark and full of a deep and abiding menace that made him seem older than his years.

The other two generals scowled privately at the young man. After all, it was common knowledge that Giarna’s favored status with the emperor was due more to the Duchess Suzine des Quivalin—niece of the emperor, and reputed mistress to the general himself—than to any inherent military skill.

Still, Giarna’s battle prowess, demonstrated against rebellious keeps across the Vingaard Plains, was grudgingly admitted even by his critics. It was his mastery of strategy, not his individual courage or his grasp of tactics, that had yet to be proven.

Under ordinary circumstances, General Giarna’s army command skills would not have been tested on the battlefield for some years yet—until he was older and more seasoned. However, a recent rash of tragic accidents—a panicked horse bucking, a jealous husband returning home, and a misunderstood command to retreat—had cost the lives of the three generals who had stood in line for this post. Thus Giarna, youthful though he was, had been given his opportunity.

Now he stood proudly before his emperor and replied.

“My force is the smallest, Excellency, but also the fastest. I have twenty thousand riders—horse archers and lancers; and also ten thousand footmen each of sword and longbowmen. It is my intention to march swiftly and come between

the Wildrunners and their base in Sithelbec. Then I will wait for Kith-Kanan to come to me, and I will shred his army with my arrows and my horsemen”

Giarna made his report coolly, without so much as a nod to his peers, as if the other two commanders were excessive baggage on this, the Boy General’s first great expedition. The older generals fumed; the implication was not lost on them.

Nor on the emperor. Quivalin V smiled at the plans of his generals. Beyond the walls of the cavernous library; within the vast palace, the roar of the admiring crowd could still be heard.

Abruptly the emperor clapped his hands, the sound echoing sharply through the large chamber. A side door to the room opened, and a woman advanced across the gleaming marble. Even the two older generals, both of whom distrusted and resented her, would have admitted that her beauty was stunning.

Her hair, of coppery red, spiraled around a diamond-encrusted tiara of rich platinum. A gown of green silk conformed to the full outline of her breasts and hips, accented by a belt of rubies and emeralds that enclosed her narrow waist. But it was her face that was most striking, with her high cheekbones and proud, narrow chin and, most significant, her eyes. They glowed with the same vibrance as the emeralds on her belt, the almost unnatural green of the Quivalin line.

Suzine Des Quivalin curtsied deeply to her uncle, the emperor. Her eyes remained downcast as she awaited his questions.

“What can you tell us about the state of the enemy’s forces?” asked the ruler. “Has your mirror been of use in this regard?”

“Indeed, Excellency,” she replied. “Though the range to the elven army is great, conditions have been good. I have been able to see much.

“The elven general, Kith-Kanan, has deployed his forces in thin screens throughout the plain, well forward of the fortress of Sithelbec. He has few horsemen—perhaps five hundred, certainly less than a thousand. Any one of your army’s wings will outnumber his entire force, perhaps by a factor of two or three.”

“Splendid,” noted Quivalin. Again he clapped, this time twice.

The figure that emerged from a different door was perhaps as opposite from the woman as was conceivable. Suzine turned to leave as this stocky individual clumped into the room. She paused only long enough to meet Giarna’s gaze, as if she was searching for something in his eyes. Whatever it was, she didn’t find it. She saw nothing but the dark insatiable hunger for war. In another moment, she disappeared through the same door she had entered.

In the meantime, the other figure advanced toward the four men. The newcomer was stooped, almost apelike in posture, and barely four feet tall. His face was grotesque, an effect accentuated by his leering grin. And where Suzine’s eyes crowned her beauty with pride and dignity, the mad, staring eyes of the dwarf showed white all around the tiny pupils and seemed to dart frantically from person to person.

If he felt any repugnance at the dwarf’s appearance, the emperor didn’t show it. Instead, he simply asked a question.

“What is the status of Thorbardin’s involvement?”

“Most Exalted One, my own dwarves of the Theiwar Clan offer you their unequivocal support. We share your hatred of the arrogant elves and wish nothing more than their defeat and destruction!”

“Nothing more, unless it be a sum of profit in the bargain,” remarked the emperor, his voice neutral.

The dwarf bowed again, too thick-skinned to be offended. “Your Eminence may take reassurance from the fact that loyalty purchased is always owed to the wealthiest patron—and here you have no competition in all of Krynn!”

“Indeed,” Quivalin added dryly. “But what of the other dwarves—the Hylar, the Daergar?”

“Alas,” sighed the Theiwar dwarf. “They have not been so open-minded as my own clan. The Hylar, in particular, seem bound by ancient treaties and affections. Our influence is great, but thus far insufficient to break these ties.”

The dwarf lowered his voice conspiratorially. “However, your lordliness, we have an agent in place—a Theiwar—and should be able to ensure that little excess of comfort is delivered to your enemies.”

“Splendid,” agreed the emperor. If he was curious as to the precise identity of the Theiwar agent, he gave no sign. “A vigorous season of warfare should bring them to heel. I hope to drive them from the plains before winter. The elven cowards will be ready to sign a treaty by spring!”

The emperor’s eyes suddenly glowed with dull fire, the calculated sense of power and brutality that had allowed him to send thousands of men to their deaths in a dozen of his empire’s wars. They flamed brighter at the thought of the arrogance of the long-lived elves and their accursed stubbornness. His voice became a growl.

“But if they continue to resist, we will not be content to wage war on the plains. Then you will march on the elven capital itself. If it is necessary to prove our might, we will reduce Silvanost itself to ashes!”

The generals bowed to their ruler, determined to do his bidding. Two of them felt fear—fear of his power and his whim. Beads of sweat collected upon their foreheads, dripping unnoticed down cheeks and beards.

General Giarna’s brow, however, remained quite dry.