



THE  
ELVEN NATIONS  
TRILOGY

VOLUME THREE

# THE QUALINESTI

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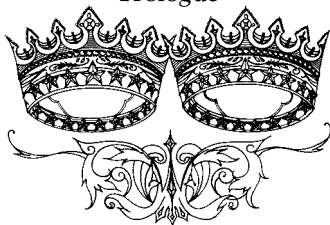
AND

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# The Cornerstone

## *Prologue*



Ten thousand footsteps rattled in the quiet mountain valley. It was early morning, just before sunrise, and mist still clung to the low places between the slopes. Five thousand elves, dwarves, and humans were assembling in this remote mountain pass. Many were warriors, resplendent in burnished armor and flowing capes, who had battled in the long years of the Kinslayer Wars, elf against man, man against dwarf, and elf against elf. So protracted had been the time of bloodshed that sons and daughters of warriors had grown up to bear arms alongside their parents.

This was an army of peace, gathered in the Kharolis Mountains. They had come from the kingdom of Thorbardin and the realm of Qualinesti to seal a bargain and to erect a fortress. Pax Tharkas, it was to be called; the name had already been agreed upon. In the elven tongue, it meant “Citadel of Peace.”

From the southern end of the pass came the delegation of dwarves, led by their new king, Glenforth Sparkstriker. It was he who had led the doughty dwarven armies against the humans of Ergoth, checking their advance in the high

mountain passes around Thorbardin. The Battle of Raven's Hook had cost Prince Glenforth an eye, but it had also put an end to the Emperor of Ergoth's plan to subjugate the dwarves. Now, with his eye patch of beaten gold and his magnificent coal-black beard rippling across his mailed chest, King Glenforth led his people in an even greater endeavor.

Behind the king came the most powerful thanes, those of Glenforth's own Clan Hylar. Richly dressed in crimson velvet and glittering with all the jewels they could possibly wear, the Hylar each bore a ceremonial hammer on his shoulder. Close behind the Hylar came the Daewar, for this great occasion wearing midnight blue tunics, yellow sashes, and great wide-brimmed hats of brown leather. The Daewar carried gilded rock chisels, as long as each dwarf was tall.

The thanes of the other clans, the Klar and the Neidar, less richly dressed but still proud, followed in the wake of their more powerful cousins. The Klar carried ceremonial trowels, and the Neidar picks.

Where the valley floor began to slope upward, King Glenforth raised a hand. The councilors and thanes halted and waited in respectful silence.

The delegation from Qualinesti approached the dwarves from the north end of the valley. Most of the delegation were formerly of Silvanesti, and had the chiseled features and light coloring of that ancient elven race. But sharp eyes could see the mingled characteristics of the Kagonesti, the elves of the forest, and even the broad features of humans. The new elven kingdom of Qualinesti had existed for just eighty years, and so far had proven the truth of its founder's dream: that elves and men and dwarves could live together in harmony, peace, and justice.

The founder himself led his nobles and notables to meet the Thorbardin thanes. In middle age now, as elves reckon time, the Speaker of the Sun was by far the most commanding figure in the valley. Age and toil had sent a few streaks

of silver through his white-blond hair, but the clear, noble features of the House of Silvanos were unaltered by all the years of strife.

Kith-Kanan, the Speaker of the Sun, the founder of the nation of Qualinesti, stopped his entourage twenty paces or so from the dwarves. Alone, he went forward to meet King Glenforth of Thorbardin.

The elf met the dwarf near a large boulder that rose up in the center of the path. Glenforth extended his thick, powerful arms.

“Royal brother!” he said heartily. “I rejoice to see you!”

“And I you, Thane of Thanesh!”

Tall elf and squat dwarf clasped hands about each other’s forearms. “This is a great day for our nations,” Kith-Kanan said, stepping back. “For all of Krynn.”

“There were many times I didn’t think I would live to see this day,” Glenforth said frankly.

“I, too, have wondered if this new kingdom of ours could have been born without the blood and suffering of the war. My late wife used to say that all things are born that way—with blood and pain.” Kith-Kanan nodded slowly, thinking of days gone by. “But we’re here now, that’s the important thing,” he added, smiling.

“Praise the gods,” said the dwarf sincerely.

Kith-Kanan turned back the folds of his emerald green cape to free his left hand. Looking to his waiting entourage, he smiled and lifted his arm, gesturing two figures forward. Glenforth squinted his good eye and saw that the two were children, a golden-haired boy and a brown-haired girl.

“King Glenforth, may I present my son, Prince Ulvian, and my daughter, Princess Verhanna,” Kith-Kanan said, pushing the children forward. Ulvian dragged his feet and hung back from the unfamiliar dwarf. Verhanna, however, approached the king and bowed deeply to him.

“You do me honor,” Glenforth said, a smile flashing amidst his black beard.

“No, sire. I am the honored one,” Verhanna replied, her high voice ringing clear in the mountain air. Her large, dark brown eyes appraised the dwarf frankly, with no sign of fear. “I’ve heard the bards sing of your greatness in battle. Now that I’ve met you, I see the truth of their songs.”

“Memories of battle are a poor comfort when one grows old and tired. I would trade all of mine for a child like you,” he said gallantly. Verhanna flushed at this praise, stammered a thank-you, and withdrew to her father’s side.

“Go on.” Kith-Kanan said to his son. “Make your greetings to King Glenforth.”

Prince Ulvian took a small step forward and bowed with a quick, bobbing motion. “Greetings, Great King,” he said, running his words together in his haste to get them out. “I’m honored to meet you.”

His duty done, Ulvian stepped back and hovered just behind his father.

With a fond pat on Verhanna’s cheek, Kith-Kanan sent his children back to the ranks of nobles. Turning once more to the dwarf, he said softly, “Excuse my son. He hasn’t been the same since his mother died. My daughter never really knew her mother; it’s been easier for her.”

Glenforth nodded politely. Practically everyone from Hylo to Silvanost knew the tale of Kith-Kanan and his human wife, Suzine. She had died many years before, in one of the last battles of the Kinslayer War. Her children matured at a much slower rate than human children, but not as slowly as full-blooded elven offspring. In human terms, both were still quite young.

The two monarchs exchanged more polite trivialities before returning to the reason for their meeting this morning. At a sign from Glenforth, an elderly dwarf came forward carrying an object covered by a red velvet cloth. It was obviously very heavy, and he held it firmly in both hands. Glenforth took the parcel, holding it easily. The elderly dwarf bowed to his king and was introduced as

Chancellor Gendrin Dunbarth, senior thane of the Hylar clan.

“My lord,” Kith-Kanan said, scrutinizing the chancellor, “I once knew a wise dwarf called Dunbarth of Dunbarth. Are you by chance related to him?”

Gendrin mopped his brow with a coarse-looking handkerchief. “Yes, Highness. Dunbarth of Dunbarth, ambassador to the court of Silvanesti, was my father,” replied the dwarf, puffing from exertion.

Kith-Kanan smiled. “I met him in Silvanost many years ago and remember him with esteem. He was an honorable fellow.”

Glenforth cleared his throat. Kith-Kanan returned his attention to the king. In loud, ringing tones, audible to the assembled thanes and Qualinesti, the dwarf king declared, “Great Speaker, on behalf of all the dwarves of Thorbardin, I present you with this special tool. I know you will wield it justly, for the benefit of your people and mine.”

He passed the velvet-wrapped burden to Kith-Kanan. The Speaker of the Sun whisked the cover away, revealing a large iron hammer, wrought in traditional dwarven style but made larger to fit the hands of an elf. The octagonal iron handle was banded with silver, and the sides of the massive flat hammerhead were gilded.

“It is called Sunderer,” Glenforth explained. “Our priests of Reorx forged it in a slow fire, and quenched it in dragon’s blood to give it a worthy temper.”

“It is magnificent,” Kith-Kanan said in awed tones. He turned the great hammer in his hands. “This is the tool of a demigod, not a mortal such as I.”

“Well, as long as it’s good enough,” the dwarf king said with a wry smile. He waved a beringed hand, and another Hylar thane came to him. This dwarf bore one of the long iron chisels banded with silver. He gave it to his king, then he and Gendrin Dunbarth withdrew.

Kith-Kanan and Glenforth walked in matched step to the

boulder that lay in the center of the pass. As they proceeded with appropriate dignity, Kith-Kanan said softly, "Will you make the announcement, or shall I?"

"This was your idea." Glenforth replied in a low voice. "You do it."

"It's a joint project, Your Highness."

"Yes, but I'm no speechifier," said the dwarf. They stood by the boulder. "Besides, everyone knows elves are better talkers than dwarves."

"First I've heard of it," Kith-Kanan muttered.

The Speaker of the Sun turned to face the delegations. King Glenforth stood resolutely beside him, his hands resting on the long chisel as a warrior rests on his sword pommel.

Kith-Kanan listened for a moment to the stillness of the valley. The mist was vanishing, burned off by the rising sun. A flock of swifts darted and wheeled overhead. Somewhere in the distance, a dove made its mournful call.

"We have come here today," he began, "to erect a fortress. Not a stronghold for war, for we have too long followed that path. This fortress, which we of Qualinesti and our friends of Thorbardin shall build and occupy together, shall be a place of peace, a place where people of all races can seek haven and find protection and rest."

The Speaker paused as the first direct rays of the sun lanced over the mountain peaks into the valley. He was facing east, and the sunbeams warmed his face. A surge of resolution, of the rightness of what they were beginning here today, passed through Kith-Kanan.

"This boulder will be the cornerstone of Pax Tharkas, the Citadel of Peace. King Glenforth and I will carve it out ourselves, as a symbol of the cooperation and friendship between our countries."

He turned to the rock and set the great hammer Sunderer on his shoulder. Glenforth butted the chisel against the rock and steadied it with both of his thick, powerful hands.

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“Swing true, Speaker,” he said, half-jesting.

Kith-Kanan raised the hammer. Ulvian and Verhanna, standing with the Qualinesti nobles, stepped forward to get a better view of their father’s work.

Sunderer came down on the chisel. A torrent of sparks fell across the boulder, spraying the dwarf king with fire. Glenforth laughed and urged Kith-Kanan to strike again. The third blow Kith-Kanan delivered was a mighty stroke indeed. It echoed through the valley like a roll of thunder and was quickly followed by the dry crack of cleaving rock. An entire side of the boulder fell away, leaving the rock with a face clean and straight. Cheers erupted from the onlookers.

Sweating in the cool mountain air, Kith-Kanan said to Glenforth, “Your hammer strikes nothing but true blows, Thane of Thanes.”

“*Your* hammer, Great Speaker, like all tools, strikes only as its wielder aims,” replied the dwarf thoughtfully. He blew on his hands and rubbed them together.

“What do you think of that, Ullie?” Kith-Kanan called, looking to his son. The boy had his head down, a hand pressed to his right cheek. The Speaker frowned. “What’s wrong, son?”

Ulvian looked up slowly to meet his father’s eyes. The boy’s face showed pain. When he took his hands away, a small cut could be seen on his cheek. Gazing at the blood staining his fingers, Ulvian said softly, “I bleed.”

“A rock chip hit you,” Verhanna said matter-of-factly. “Some landed on me, too.” She shook the folds of her boyish clothes and bits of stone and grit fell out.

Prince Ulvian’s face twisted in anger. “I bleed!” he cried. He backed away from his father and bumped into a wall of courtiers and nobles. They parted for him, and the panicked prince fled into the crowd.

“Ulvian, come back!” Kith-Kanan shouted. The boy did not heed him.



“Want me to catch him?” Verhanna offered, sure in the knowledge that she was swifter than her brother.

“No, child. Stay here.”

Kith-Kanan summoned his castellan, the elf in charge of his household, Tamanier Ambrodel. The elderly, gray-haired elf, dressed in a gray doublet and mauve cape, stepped out of the crowd.

“Find my son, Tam, and take him to a healer if he needs one,” said the Speaker.

Tamanier bowed. “Yes, Highness.”

Kith-Kanan watched his castellan disappear into the crowd. Hefting the great hammer, he said, “Ullie will be all right.” Glenforth cleared his throat and pretended to be studying the boulder before him.

Verhanna and the rest of the crowd stood back as the Speaker of the Sun and the King of Thorbardin resumed their places at the stone. The valley rang with the sound of iron on rock.

In short order, the stone became a cube, square on four sides and rough on top. King Glenforth wasn’t tall enough to bring the chisel to bear on the top of the boulder, so his thanes formed themselves into a living stair, that he might climb onto the rock. It was quite a sight, all the richly bedecked dwarves of Clans Hylar and Daewar, their thick arms locked together, bent over and braced against the cornerstone. Glenforth set aside the chisel and climbed up their backs. Once he was atop the stone, the thanes passed the chisel to him.

“Well, Great Speaker,” said the dwarf from his lofty perch, “now I am higher than you! Will your councilors elevate you as mine did me?”

Kith-Kanan tossed the hammer to the top of the boulder, then faced his people. “You heard the Thane of Thanes! Will the nobles of Qualinesti stoop so that their Speaker can rise to the occasion?”

Half a hundred elves and men surged to the rock, ready

to aid Kith-Kanan. Laughing, the Speaker ordered them back, then chose three elves and three humans. They looped their arms around each others' waists and bent to the rock. As the others cheered, Kith-Kanan climbed nimbly atop the boulder. He and Glenforth stood side by side, and the cheering continued. Finally Kith-Kanan raised his hands and waved for silence.

"My good and loyal friends!" he cried. "Many times in the recent past I have wondered if our coming to this new land was wise. Many times I have asked myself, should I have stayed in Silvanost? Should I have fought to establish in our old homeland the ideals we now share?"

There were shouts of "No! No!" from the crowd.

"And now—" Kith-Kanan again waved for quiet. "And now, I see us here today—men, elves, and dwarves—working together where once we fought, and I know I could have done nothing less than lead you to this new land, to make this new nation. You have all suffered and struggled and bled for Qualinesti. So have I. We did not fight to make a country like my father's, where tradition and age count for more than truth and justice. I do not want to rule for centuries and see all my ideals grow hoary with time. Therefore, on this rock, with this great hammer, Sunderer, in my hand, I will make you this pledge: The day this fortress is finished, I shall abdicate in favor of my successor."

A loud murmur of surprise spread through the assembly. The dwarves stroked their beards and looked concerned. Some of the Qualinesti elves cried out that Kith-Kanan should rule for life.

"No! Listen to me!" Kith-Kanan shouted. "This is what we fought for! The ruler and the ruled must be bound by a solemn pact that neither shall suffer the other unwanted. Once this fortress of peace is complete, let a younger, fresher mind lead Qualinesti forward to greater happiness and glory."

He nodded to King Glenforth. The dwarf placed the

chisel against the surface of the rock. The gilded head of Sunderer flashed in the sun. Sparks flew as it smote Glenforth's chisel, and the blow Kith-Kanan struck reverberated down through the boulder into the stony ground of Krynn. Every elf, every dwarf, every human present felt the mighty stroke.