



THE CROWN AND THE SWORD



THE RISE OF SOLAMNIA
VOLUME TWO
DOUGLAS NILES

A NEW SOLAMNIA

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THE RISE OF SOLAMNIA

Lord of the Rose

The Crown and the Sword

The Measure and the Truth



THE
CROWN
AND THE
SWORD

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VOLUME TWO

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The title is set against a background of a flag with a crown and a sword. The word "CROWN" is written in a large, ornate, serif font, with the letters "C" and "S" being particularly large and decorative. The words "AND THE" are smaller and positioned between "CROWN" and "SWORD". The author's name "DOUGLAS NILES" is at the bottom.

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THE LORD MARSHAL

A column of dust marked the progress of two dozen horsemen across the flat expanse of the central Vingaard Plain. They rode in a neat file of pairs, and though the men and horses were coated with a layer of grit indicating a long, hard ride, they maintained ranks with military precision. The mounts were large, long legged, and nimble, and they crossed the miles with an easy canter. Even now, as they moved into a region where the ground rose and fell, their gait remained steady, their course as true and straight as the flight of an arrow.

At the head of the column rode a single man, wearing the garb of a knight with the unusual feature that his breastplate was not adorned with any symbol—as if he belonged to none of the orders, not to the Crown, the Sword, or the Rose. His shoulders and back were draped with a woolen cape that covered the back of his saddle and flapped loosely. His horse was a nondescript roan mare, a little sloppy of gait, though her eyes flashed with intelligence.

“We approach the Narrows, Lord Marshal,” commented a rider, spurring his mount as he came up on the left of the man. The rider wore the epaulets of a knight captain, though, like the one he called Lord Marshal, he bore no insignia upon his armor.

The lead knight merely nodded, taking in the changing surroundings through narrowed, bird-far-seeing, eyes. Only after studying the terrain for several moments did he raise his hand and point in a direction slightly to the right of their current bearing.

“General Dayr will gather the Crown Army there. We need to reach him before nightfall.”

“Aye, my lord,” replied the captain.

Without breaking stride, the lord marshal tugged his reins and swerved his horse in the new direction. No word was spoken, but the rest of the company followed suit.

The horses slowed to a trot as they worked their way down the steep slope of a ravine that surged and galloped up the other side. The formation opened only slightly at the increased speed, and the close ranks held firm as they moved fleetly over increasingly broken ground.

The column of riders came upon the army encampment in the scant shelter against the wind provided by a low hill. Lookouts on top of the elevation had spotted their approach and passed word down to the troops who were making their supper preparations. Two knights, a captain and a gold-caped general, left the warmth of their cook fire to greet the new arrivals.

“My Lord Marshal, welcome! Your timing is perfect. I plan to attack Ankhur’s North Wing by dawn tomorrow,” reported the gold-caped general. He was a handsome knight with the flowing mustaches of a traditional Solamnic. The insignia of the white Crown was prominent upon his breastplate.

“General Dayr, Captain Franz,” replied the lord marshal, nodding to the two knights. Two willing men-at-arms took his horse. He dismounted with the ease of a natural horseman, stretched, and for just a moment, winced at the pain of cramps in muscles that only a few

years earlier would have made no complaint at the end of such a ride. Though his beard and hair were black, a trace of thin lines marked the area around his hard, cold eyes. His beard was short, neatly trimmed, and accented the outline of a strong, jutting chin.

“You made good time, my lord. We didn’t expect you until late tomorrow.”

“General Rankin and the Swords are advancing on the river. The enemy is in retreat in the south. Here, on his north flank, is the point of decision. I wanted to be here. And naturally, my Freemen were eager to ride.”

The lord looked almost with affection at the two dozen men of his personal guard. Like himself—and unique among the three armies of Solamnia—they did not wear the insignia of any knightly order. Instead, their loyalty—and their lives—was pledged to the leader who had forged those sometimes fractious forces into one great weapon of war. Captain Powell, the leader of the guard, had been an influential knight in the hierarchy of Palanthas but had renounced that post to serve the leader who, he devoutly believed, was the only man who could restore the realm of Solamnia to its past glories.

“Very good,” acknowledged the general. “Would you like a look at the position before dark?”

“Yes, right away.” The lord marshal turned to the captain of the Freemen, the man who had ridden at his side when they entered the camp. Another knight, his long mustaches caked with the dust of the ride, was making a report to the captain. Both men stood erect when the lord marshal looked their way.

“Captain Powell, come with us. Sergeant Ian, see that the men get something to eat. I want the Freemen to be well rested in the morning.”

“Aye, my lord,” both replied in unison.

The general and the two captains accompanied their army commander in a brisk walk up the low hill. From the crest, they could see a long distance.

The scene was dominated by a deep gorge, like a wound where a god had cleaved his sword into the flesh of the world. The Upper Narrows of the Vingaard River formed a bottleneck in that mighty flowage, a series of raging torrents and spuming cascades created as the water surged between two confining, looming walls. Even as the descending ground forced the Vingaard northward with relentless, irresistible velocity, the constricted channel compressed and accelerated the current. This was a wild place—the rocky ground around the river was inhospitable to farmers, and the water within its sheer-walled gorge too difficult for grazing animals to reach. The plains above the gorge were dry and dusty, bereft of trees and other vegetation, and subject to bitter, cold winds in winter and scorching, dry heat in summer.

It was on the west bank of this river gorge that two large military forces faced each other. The camp of the Crown Army was well situated between a pair of ridges radiating out from the round hill. With a company of infantry and another of archers on top of the hill, it was a formidable position. General Dayr had garrisoned both of the ridges flanking his camp and had an extensive picket line, with mounted outriders, guarding the main approach.

But all this was of secondary interest to the lord marshal. His attention was focused on the enemy, arrayed in a jagged, dirty smudge of fortifications backed by troops and war machines, all forming a semicircular bulge, with the gorge and the valley of the Vingaard behind its right and right rear. There was a route of access—or retreat—behind the enemy camp.

leading southward along this side of the river. Several paths dropped from the edge vanishing into the depths of the canyon beside both camps.

“Is there a route through the gorge?” asked the lord marshal.

“A narrow path, my lord. We have a company defending it, and Ankhar has a similar force down there. It is a standoff—no advance for either side. And no retreat, either, considering that both paths are overlooked by the enemy.”

“Good. Your men only need to stand firm down there.”

“Ankhar himself is in the camp,” Dayr noted. “We spotted him late yesterday afternoon.”

“He knows his central and southern wings are already across the Vingaard. Here is where he has chosen to make his stand and fight,” the commander remarked. “I have come here for the same reason.” He turned toward Captain Powell of the Freeman, who was sitting astride his horse to the marshal’s right. “Go to the baggage train and find the wagon we dispatched here. Pull out a dozen of the casks that came from the Compound.”

“Very well, my lord!” Powell saluted and rode away.

If Dayr was curious about his orders, he knew better than to ask. “Would you like to review the disposition of my forces?” asked the general instead.

The lord marshal shook his head. “No, I’m sure you have prepared well. But tell me, what about the trenches?”

He indicated the fortifications around the enemy camp. Deep gashes in the ground, scored in a zigzag pattern, shielded the whole array of Ankhar’s troops.

“Something novel is called for, don’t you think, my lord?” Dayr turned and gestured to a young knight. The man had light golden hair, worn long, with the emblem of a crested bird on his tunic. “This is Sergeant Heath of the Order of Clerists.”

The commander nodded. “The priest-knights are finally arriving at the front, I see.”

Sergeant Heath saluted stiffly. “I beg my lord’s pardon for the delay. I assure you that it was not caused by unwillingness on the part of my company. The Council of Whitestone was slow to react, but as of this year, there are mystics and Kingfishers both sailing for your shores.”

“I understand—Sir Templar has apprised me of the resistance from Lord Liam and the reaction of the council. So I am doubly pleased to see you. How large is your company?”

“I have a dozen priests, my lord, and an equal number of acolytes. We pledge our swords—and our spells—to your cause.”

“Very good.” The lord marshal gestured at the enemy entrenchments. “Now tell me what you plan to do about those.”



The camp of the Crown Army was quietly astir by an hour after midnight. Captain Powell, with his Freeman and the casks from the Compound, was already gone. Now Sergeant Heath and his Clerists slipped away from the command post and immediately melted into the full darkness that descended after moonset. Each knight-cleric wore a cloak of grayish brown and had smudges of the same color darkening the skin of their faces and hands, so they may well have been invisible as they closed on the nearest trenches of the enemy position. Leaving their weapons and armor behind, they advanced with stealth and concealment as their only protection.

After an hour of careful advancement, the mystics were in position, only a few dozen feet short of the deep, wide trenches of Ankhar's army. Each priest-warrior was alone and kneeling his task; they all remained silent and in their camouflage, invisible to the enemy sentries.

Heath himself knelt before the broadest section of trench. Barely daring to breathe, he watched the shadowy figures of goblins and ogres clomping back and forth on sentry duty behind the ditch. He waited, lying flat on the ground, until he was certain the rest of his men were ready.

Night still cloaked them in utter darkness as the knight-priest rose to a kneeling position. He held a fistful of gritty clay in his hand as he murmured a prayer—and an appeal—to King Jolith. Soon he had worked the material into a hard lump. He felt the answering presence of his god, a powerful blessing of magic, and in one smooth gesture rose to his feet, shouted the climactic words to the spell, and hurled the lump of dirt into the trench.

All along the line, the Clerist knights worked the same clay magic. The sudden noise of the spellcasting alerted the brutish defenders, who rushed forward to launch spears and arrows into the darkness—even though the mysterious attackers were already falling back.

Behind them they left the results of their magic: twenty-two earthen bridges, each spanning a section of the army's trenchworks.



“Light!” cried General Dayr, as he heard the culminating words of the Clerists' spellcasting. “Bring out the torches!”

Flames immediately erupted from a hundred barrels, all positioned along the front of the army—directly along the lines of advance for the Crown Army's light cavalry. All three companies of the Thelgaard Lancers waited there in ranks, already mounted, prepared for the signal. These riders, lightly armored and riding very fast horses, were trained to carry long lances in the charge. But this morning, their arms would be unique.

Each rider carried several dry torches in one hand. As the oil-filled barrels were ignited, the horsemen started forward, their disciplined mounts filing close by the blazing containers. As the line of riders passed, each man thrust the head of his torch into the oil. The dry branches instantly ignited. Without hesitating, the riders spurred their horses into a canter. The lines of cavalry were eerily illuminated by the blazing torches bobbing and waving over each man's head, and those columns rode directly toward the enemy camp.

Where a few moments earlier Ankhar's troops had been lolling casually behind deep entrenchments, these defenders now faced the sudden reality of nearly two dozen earthen bridges, magically conjured to cross the barriers. Ogres bellowed and roared at the goblins while the smaller fighters scrambled to take up weapons and race to the terminus of each span. A horn sounded somewhere in the rear of the camp, a lonely summons to arms.

But already the human riders were racing to confront the defenders. The Thelgaard Lancers sped across the magical bridges and charged through the chaotic soldiers trying to block their path. Shouting men drove goblins back by the simple expedient of waving burning torches to the right and left. Once they had breached the trenches, the horsemen galloped into the center of the huge enemy camp. Some threw their torches into command tents or ignited crates and barrels of supplies stacked haphazardly here and there. Other attackers continued onward, charging through the encampment toward the great war machines lined up at the

rear of Ankhar's army.

A human captain barked commands, rousing a small company of men—former Dark Knights—to oppose the rush of thundering horses. In the confusion, the footmen did not have time to arm themselves properly, however; they were easily swept aside by the rampaging horsemen. More flames brightened the chilly predawn as several oil casks erupted into greasy fire, the liquid spilling along the ground, igniting as it flowed.

General Dayr, astride his steed, watched the initial onslaught with satisfaction. Even before the last of the light cavalry had crossed the bridges, he issued his next order: "Kaolyn Axers—move out!"

The doughty dwarves of this heavy infantry unit started forward to the steady beat of a deep drum. This was the First Regiment of the Axers, one of three serving in the lord marshal's army. They had come down from the Garnet Mountains for two reasons: because the ogres and goblins of Ankhar's horde were their hereditary enemies and because they would be paid well for fighting. They fought as tenaciously as any knight and with their thick plate mail shields and armor, short, muscular legs; and keen-bladed axes, they could form a veritable forward-moving wall on a battlefield.

Now the dwarves marched on the double, trotting across the bridges immediately after the last of the lancers. The black-tunicked dwarves formed a defensive semicircle around the terminus of each of the earthen spans. The mere presence of glaring dwarves and whirling axe blades was enough, for the time being, to keep the poorly disciplined goblins and ogres at bay.

At the same time, the farthest riders continued their rampage among the war machines of the enemy batteries. Some tossed their torches onto the bales of hay surrounding the position, while others dismounted to push the kindling up against the frames of the catapults, ballistae, and trebuchets. Immediately the dry wood caught fire, sending flames shooting dozens of feet into the air. Much oil, for the soaking of flaming shot when the batteries were active, was stored around the catapults. These barrels were quickly splintered and the liquid contents ignited. A wall of orange flame rose into the night.

Jaymes, the lord marshal, astride his horse very near the front of the Crown Army, watched as the enemy commander was finally spotted amidst the flaming camp.

Ankhar, the half-giant, stood head and shoulders above even the largest of the bull ogres. But it was more than size that drew attention to his presence. His voice was a roar that could drown out the sound of thunder, as he rallied shaken companies and rebuked retreating troops. Ankhar raised an arm that was like the bough of a mighty oak. His fist, an all-too-solid symbol of his army's power, punched the air over his head.

A great cheer rose from the goblins, the ogres, and the mercenary men. They gathered for a counterattack, surging against the dwarves guarding the approach to the conjured bridge, rushing toward the light cavalrymen who had wreaked such havoc in the camp. Goblins howled and shrieked and threw themselves against the dwarven axes. Ogres roared, wielding huge clubs as they rushed the Kaolyn heavy infantry.

Their torches expended, the Thelgaard Lancers fought with swords; many simply flowed out of the way of the enemy troops, riding their fleet horses away from the rear of the enemy camp. Snarling warg wolves raced after them. Some of these savage canines bore goblin riders, while others simply screeched and howled, drawn by the lure of the hunting pack. B

the horses were too fast, and the wolves could only follow them across the plains, away from the camp, the battle, and the decision of the day.



The sun had not yet risen, but the eastern sky was now a broad swath of pale blue brightened near the horizon by the imminent sun. The fires throughout Ankhar's camp still burned but no longer as beacons in the darkness. Instead, they spewed broad columns of dark smoke into the sky, each pyre marking the ruins of some part of the enemy army.

Jaymes turned to General Dayr, a command rising in the lord marshal's throat—but the general guiding the Crown Army was already shouting to his captains.

"White Riders, charge!"

Now the heavy knights advanced, in more concentrated columns than the Thelgaar Lancers. The White Riders formed the shock troops of the Crown Army, armored and shielded, riding huge, shaggy steeds that loomed over every other creature on the battlefield. They charged in four files, each spilling across one of the bridges near the center of the enemy camp. Trumpets brayed, marking the pace as each company accelerated.

Hearing the horns, feeling the thundering cadence of heavy hooves, the dwarves protecting those four bridges quickly wheeled to the side, allowing the knights to cross with undiminished momentum.

One company of Ankhar's human warriors tried to make a stand near the river gorge, but they were shattered by a single charge of the White Riders. Shields broke beneath crushing hooves, pikes and spear shafts snapped in two, and the little knot of defenders shrank until the last of them were ridden down.

Much of Ankhar's army streamed away, falling back around the charred outlines of the artillery park, hastening southward along the bank of the Vingaard. Three hundred ogres formed a square in the center of the melee. All around them, the troops of the horde were dropping back, sometimes with good order, in other cases in full rout.

The separated companies of the White Riders gathered. Knights lowered their visors and took up such lances as had survived the fray or drew their heavy, bloody swords. The ogres alone stood before them as the Crown Knights rolled forward in the battle's final charge. The clash of steel against steel rang out once more, mingling with the shrieks of wounded horses and the cries of bleeding ogres and dying men.

When the last of the riders finally limped away, not a single ogre remained standing.



"We've turned the flank, my lord," General Dayr reported. He tried to maintain his detachment, but the fierce elation of battlefield success flared in his eyes, gleamed in the momentary glimpse of his teeth. "They're running for the fords to the south of here."

"Well done, General," Jaymes said, nodding toward the dust marking the enemy's retreat. "Let them go for the time being, and see to your wounded."

"The Clerists are already at work with the other healers. There remains only one stumbling block."

The lord marshal arched his eyebrow, thought for a moment, and nodded. "The company at the gorge, down at the river?"

“Yes, my lord. I have sent scouts to bring me reports on them. But it looks like they can pull out safely; Ankhar has enough ogres left to shower them with boulders if they try to move out.”

“All right. Let’s have a look,” the lord marshal acknowledged. He nudged his horse in the flanks and—accompanied only by the two dozen knights of the Caergoth Freeman—set out to inspect the battlefield.

BETRAYAL, AND BETRAYAL

The two armies, like exhausted wrestlers, had separated and now lay prostrate, gasping for breath, thirsty for cool drink. The plain around the Narrows was no longer a place for the living, but for the dead and the doomed.

To the latter end, men and monsters had done their work well. The evidence lay all around, first indicated by the sweeping shapes of the vultures and crows circling overhead. The scavengers swirled downward like dark, macabre snowflakes to settle among the lifeless forms scattered across a mile or more of the plains just to the west of the deep gorge. Here and there the shape of a great war machine, a catapult or a ballista, was discernable through the soot and ash that caked the charred timbers; this was all that remained of the lethal devices. Smoke still spiraled upward from the large fire pits where shot had been heated. In one place barrels of oil had been cracked open to soak into the dry ground. Fire burned over the very plain itself, marking the place with a thick, smudgy pillar of black smoke rising into the otherwise cloudless skies.

Nearby lay more than a hundred dead horses, a fabulous buffet for the scavengers. Among the slain beasts, with their torn saddles and once-grand regalia, lay a great number of goblins and more than a few ogres, proof of the charge that had, at last, broken the ranks of Ankhara's hordes. Many knights had perished here as well, but their bodies had been removed for burial or cremation—unlike the beasts of the half-giant's horde—the humans gathered up their slain and gave them the

A kind of silence had descended over the field, filled just hours before with the clashing of steel and cries of pain and exultation. Nevertheless, a listener would have heard a keening, almost mournful wailing in the wind that scoured this dusty ground. Occasionally, too, would be heard the raucous protests of the birds, as crows were forced to yield to the great beaks and crushing wings of the vultures, and the ravens, in turn, were driven from their morsels by the greedy crows. The black-feathered birds gave the scene a life of its own, a shifting pattern of movement overlaying the great sprawl of the dead.

Accompanied by the two dozen riders of the Caergoth Freeman, Jaymes rode across the field at an easy gait, though his sturdy roan showed signs of trepidation. She tossed her head about, veering away from a slain ogre. Her ears stood upright, quivering.

The riders made their way through the detritus of battle until they came to the rim of the precipice. They peered down into the river gorge, where the waters of the Narrows churned and plunged in the deep channel. Eyes narrowed, the lord marshal took in the situation.

Two companies of warriors were visible on a flat shelf of land beside the rapid flow, facing each other in lines ranked behind poised spears and shields. One group consisted of human men in leather armor and metal caps, formed around a pennant displaying the sigil of the

Crown. The other was a band of goblins, ragged but fierce, with shaggy cloaks and long wicked-looking pikes. The surface upon which both companies stood was low, barely a few feet above the water; the river beside them was deep, dark, and moving rapidly. The shelf of level ground was perhaps a quarter-mile long, but only ten yards wide. On the side away from the water, sheer cliffs swept upward hundreds of feet, leading to the rider's vantage.

The warriors in the gorge seemed evenly matched, perhaps two hundred of each side, and they faced each other in the center of the little swath of level ground. Even with his first quick glance, the man took in how those companies arrived at such a place. The humans had descended through a narrow ravine, a passage barely wide enough for single file, that snake up to reach the plateau nearly a mile away from the river gorge. The goblins had marched down a narrow trail carved out of the very side of the cliff. That path twisted out of sight to the man's right, but he could clearly see the lower half and imagined that it continued up to reach the crest of the bluff some distance up the gorge.

Another company of riders appeared on the plain above the canyon, horses trotting around the pillar of smoke marking the oil fire. They numbered perhaps a dozen men, many wearing full plate armor of gleaming steel. One, a herald, held aloft a standard from which a proud banner flew—a white crown on a field of black. It matched the sigil displayed by the company down by the river, though it was a much larger and more ornate emblem—for this was the banner of General Dayr himself.

The general broke away from his entourage to ride, alone, toward the man who still sat astride his horse at the brink of the precipice. The escort of Freeman withdrew to a discreet distance, so the two commanders could speak privately.

"My Lord Marshal," Dayr said as he drew up to Jaymes. "I hope you are satisfied with the fruits of our victory."

"Yes, General," said the marshal. "We have broken Ankhar's army in the north. I understand that, even now, he is pulling the bulk of his horde back to the east side of the river."

"True. But there is a new development. One of his men, a sergeant of the Dark Knights, has come forward under a banner of truce. He says that Ankhar himself would like to have a parley with the officer in command."

"The half-giant would so expose himself?" asked the marshal.

The general nodded. "He says he will come forward alone, to meet a lone human, on the spit of land there, above the river. There is a narrow gorge, some ten paces wide, that would divide the two leaders. Of course I am more than willing to go, Marshal Jaymes, but I thought that I should give you the option of making the parley yourself."

The rider nodded. "I'd like that. After two years of fighting this barbarian, I should like to meet with him face-to-face to take his measure with my own eyes."

"As you wish," the general replied.

"What, do you imagine, is the purpose of this parley?"

"I suspect he will bargain for mutual withdrawal of those troops you see down there by the river. The battle, of course, is over, yet the potential for slaughter remains. You see, our men—that's the Second Company of the Vingaard Arms—might make their escape through yonder ravine, but a hundred ogres have been posted upon the far rim. If our men try to withdraw, they could be crushed by the rocks dropped by the ogres from above. At the same time,

Ankhar's goblins are likewise trapped. If they withdraw up the cliffside trail, our archers will be able to cut them to pieces. In either case it is likely that no more than a handful of the enemy troops will survive to escape the gorge."

"But Ankhar's army is already retreating. I presume there is a reason why we cannot simply wait him out, bring out the company when the ogres have left."

"The rains, my Lord Marshal. Up in the Garnet range it has been pouring for several days and the river is rising by nearly a foot with every passing hour. If we don't pull the men out of there, the matter is moot; by tomorrow morning, they will all have drowned."

The marshal nodded, taking in the scene again with those sharp, penetrating eyes. The cliffs, the river, the ravine, and the trail were all as the general had described. If the men in the gorge were not soon plucked to safety, they were doomed.

"Very well," said Marshal Jaymes Markham. "Send word to Ankhar through his messenger to tell him that I will meet him and parley."



The half-giant was an impressive creature, standing nearly twice as tall as the man glaring at him across the gulf of the narrow crevice. Ankhar was unarmed, as was Jaymes; this had been a fundamental condition of the parley. Still, the creature's mere fists looked capable of crushing the skull of a human soldier, and the glower on his face suggested that crushing the man's skull was a very tempting notion right now.

Jaymes studied the hulking barbarian who had been his adversary over the past two years. Ankhar's brow loomed over his eyes like the craggy outcrop of a cliff, accenting the bestial features of the ogrish face. The eyes were small in comparison to the overall size of the huge face, but they glittered with a certain cold, appraising intelligence. The man had the unsettling awareness that the half-giant was studying him with the same curiosity he himself felt.

"You are called the Lord of the Rose?" asked the half-giant in a voice like the growl of a bear.

"Some call me that, but I claim no such title for myself."

"You fight under the white banner, with Crown and Sword and Rose all woven together. That seems to me like you claim the sign."

The man shrugged. "You can take it any way you like. I don't see a banner over your own army, yet your troops shed blood aplenty, just the same."

The half-giant's broad mouth curled into a cruel, tusk-baring smile. "They have killed many men, in the name of the Truth. I am the Truth. They rejoice in drinking human blood, taking human women—and miles of land!"

"Yet you have given many lands back, this last year. Three times you have faced my army and three times been defeated."

Ankhar shrugged. "The war goes on. Many more men will die. This is Truth."

"Right now, the truth is that your company and mine are trapped together on the bank of the river," Jaymes noted. "If we hold our positions, neither group can escape—each would be destroyed by troops on the heights if they try to make higher ground."

Ankhar snorted contemptuously. "Let them stay where they are."

"Was it not you who requested this parley? What, then, was your purpose?"

“Perhaps I want a face for my enemy,” growled the half-giant. “You fight well ... for human.”

“I fight when I must—and when I fight, I fight well.”

“I will kill you soon enough. For now, I see you, and spit upon you!”

“You’re a creature of the mountains, I am told,” Jaymes replied evenly. “Do your agents tell you of the storms in the Garnet range? It has been raining, hard, for days. The creeks and streams are full, spilling down toward the plains.”

The glowering brow furrowed for a moment in thought. If he was surprised by the information imparted by Jaymes, he gave no indication. “So the river rises? All our men will drown?”

“It looks that way to me,” Jaymes said. “I prefer my men to die bravely, not drown ignominiously, and I am willing to let your troops live also, in fair trade.”

The half-giant hawked and turning his head to the side, spit noisily. “A fair trade? So that your men can take more of my mountains? Drive my people from the plains? Kill them?” His voice had dropped to an angry snarl.

“I make no apologies. Nor will I enumerate the list of crimes committed by your ‘people’—the wrongs that make it necessary for us to wage war against you.”

The half-giant bellowed then almost instantly grew calm. “What do you suggest?”

“I offer to pull my archers back from the rim of the cliff, so that your company can march up the trail and rejoin your army as you cross the river. In return, your ogres will withdraw from the heights over the ravine, so that my own men can file out of the deathtrap that the gorge will soon become.”

Ankhar glared, spit into the ravine again, and growled deep in his chest. Finally he nodded.

“Let us make this truce. Our warriors will live to fight another day. I agree with you. Better soldiers die in battle than drown in a thunderstorm.”

“Good,” Jaymes replied. He studied Ankhar’s face, looking for any hint of treachery—or sincerity. “So, too, shall I agree to a truce.” He looked up at the sky. “It is past noon now. The shadow of the sun will reach that white layer of stone, halfway up the cliff, in about two hours. Shall we let the truce take effect at that time?”

“Yes. To last until sunset over the plains. There will be no killing during that time.”

“Very well,” said the man. He nodded thoughtfully. “Your warriors fought well. It was only a fierce charge of knights that, in the end, broke your line.”

“Bah. My Thorn Knights’re not here. Their magic would shatter any charge—kill your tusk-riding can riders!”

“So they might have. But they did not.” Jaymes shrugged as if it were a matter of no great concern. Yet he knew that the half-giant spoke the truth. The Thorn Knights had formerly served Mina and the One God in her campaign to conquer Ansalon. They were formidable wizards, devoted to the dark arts in the furtherance of their own power. In many battles their presence had proved decisive, but their numbers were few. Jaymes was well aware that those potent wizards might have made a difference and was glad they were absent from this battle.

“I go now, to tell of the truce. I withdraw my company,” Ankhar said. “Next time, may we shed each other’s blood.”

“So we may,” the human replied. “I will not wish you luck in that endeavor.”

The half-giant chuckled, the sound an odd mixture of cruelty and humor. “I wish you luck.”

—to stay healthy until that day,” he said. “So I may kill you myself.”

“Aye—and the same to you,” replied the marshal, the commander of all the Solamn Armies.

Still facing each other, the two leaders backed warily away from the edge of the narrow crevice. Jaymes reached behind, took the bridle of his roan, and swung easily into the saddle. As he cantered away, he glanced back and saw that the half-giant was still watching him with those too-small, too-intelligent eyes.



The signalman caught the attention of the captain of the Second Company of the Vingaard Arms, the unit trapped on the shelf beside the river. He waved his flags at the rim of the precipice. The orders were simple: “Prepare to withdraw,” followed by, “Await the command to execute the order.” A simple wave of the company’s Crown pennant returned the acknowledgement that the message had been received and understood.

General Dayr and Marshal Jaymes stood beside the flagman, watching the shadow that had already crept far up the canyon’s wall. In another quarter of an hour or so, it would reach the strata of white rock that signaled the commencement of the agreed-upon truce. A scout rode up, and both commanders turned to regard him.

“The ogres are indeed withdrawing from the rim of the ravine,” the man reported without formality. “Already they have marched more than a mile, and when I departed from the scene just moments ago, they were making steady progress away.”

“Are they out of range by now?”

“Aye, my lord—the ogres are no longer able to strike at the men of the Vingaard Arms.”

“It appears as though the brute is keeping his word,” Dayr murmured, raising his eyebrow in a gesture of mild surprise. “I hadn’t been entirely sure until now.”

Jaymes shook his head very slightly. “I was sure he would pull the ogres back. But I am not yet convinced that he is keeping his word.”

“And our archers are now down from the heights. They wouldn’t have time to return to their firing positions if Ankhar’s company makes haste.”

“I’m sure they’ll get out of there as fast as they can,” said the army commander.

A few moments later, the sun’s shadow reached the requisite position. The two men watched as the companies beside the river slowly backed away from each other, the humans moving toward the lower terminus of the narrow ravine, the goblins to the foot of the trail that twisted so precariously along the canyon’s wall. When perhaps three hundred yards of distance was between them, the formations abandoned their battle lines and formed into narrow columns, each starting up its respective route of retreat.

“Now we arrive at the moment of truth,” said Jaymes. “Or perhaps I should say, ‘the Truth.’ ”

“I have heard that he calls himself this,” Dayr remarked. “Even under the most severe interrogation, his warriors insist that their general is the Truth.”

For several long moments, the mutual withdrawals proceeded quietly. The last of the human warriors filed into the ravine, disappearing from the sight of the two commanders, though some goblins were still visible making their way up the winding trail. The head of that column approached the first switchback and continued upward, vanishing momentarily.

as the trail cut under a broad overhang of rugged limestone.

“After the barbarians are across the river, do you want me to pursue them in the direction of Dargaard?” asked Dayr. He shuddered at the thought of that dark and haunted fortress.

“That will not be necessary. Ankhar’s troops will not head toward Dargaard,” Jaymes declared.

“Oh? What do you predict?”

“He will concentrate on the east bank of the Vingaard, to hold us at bay, while he gathers his strength against Solanthus,” the marshal stated. “He has already brought his central army to the west of that fortress, while his southern force is screening the territory in the Garn foothills.”

The city of Solanthus had been besieged for two years, ever since Ankhar’s horde had first rampaged across the plains—before Jaymes Markham had taken command of the Solamnic Army. Though the city had resisted the barbarian’s few attempts at storming the walls, it also remained out of reach of relief columns and supplies from the rest of Solamnia.

“You think he will make another attempt to conquer Solanthus, then?” Dayr replied, moderately surprised. “Those walls have held him at bay for more than two years.”

“Yes, but he has made no serious attack,” Jaymes answered. “And now we have bested him in three major battles in the open field. Each time he has been forced to give up another sector of the plains, and with Solanthus to his rear, still resisting, he will see that, inevitably, we intend to break his siege, if he keeps losing ground.”

“I understand that the situation is dire in that city,” the general said. “It is all the clergy can do to maintain food at near starvation levels. Though I hear that the duchess has rallied the people courageously, that she eats no more than the commoners.”

The lord marshal nodded. “She has a core of steel, that’s clear.”

Dayr agreed somewhat ruefully. “When Duke Rathskell married her, I thought she was a trite little wench, suited only for the bedroom. Now he’s dead, and she is holding the city together. I am, frankly, surprised. I confess I did not give her credit for that kind of spine.”

“Nobody did,” Jaymes said. “Sometimes adversity seems to bring forth remarkable strength.”

A trumpet blared some distance away, and both men turned quickly at the unmistakable sound of alarm. The general grimaced, while the marshal’s lips tightened in anger. “Liar!” he said between clenched teeth. “So the one called the Truth is a liar after all.”

“But his ogres cannot have returned to the ravine—they were too far away!” countered Dayr.

Jaymes nodded, pointing downward, where the column of goblins was halfway up the cliff, still winding along the narrow trail. Soon they would vanish from sight as they continued behind the curve of the canyon wall. But moments later, the scout came into view, lashing his horse into a froth as he galloped toward the two commanders.

“My lords!” he shouted, thundering closer and pulling up in a skidding stop. “Tracher! Ankhar’s Thorn Knights—at least one of them—has appeared in the ravine. He has created a cloud of deadly gas that sinks and slithers along the trail, killing every man caught within. The survivors are fleeing back toward the river, but the cloud is moving quickly—it seems certain they are all doomed.”

“The bastard!” snarled Dayr. “We should have kept the archers in position—we could pick

off those goblins and show him the fruits of his treachery!”

Jaymes ignored his general, instead striding up to the nearby signalman who stood listening to the scout's report in shock, his banners neatly coiled at his feet. “Raise the red pennant—now!” snapped the marshal.

Quickly the man did as he was told. Another scout rode up, confirming that the men of the trapped company were perishing in the magically conjured gas cloud. The Thorn Knight, of course, had teleported away immediately; there was no chance of exacting vengeance upon the villain. The lord marshal displayed no reaction upon hearing this news, even as his general practically wept with frustration and rage.

The crimson banner snapped in the breeze as the flagman hoisted it upon a slender pole. He waved it back and forth in response to the marshal's curt command. Dayr and the nearby soldiers watched anxiously, knowing better than to ask Jaymes what was going on. Below the vile gas, a greenish yellow in color, seeped from the bottom of the ravine. No man could escape that corridor of death.

The cliffs above the fleeing goblins suddenly shattered in a gout of smoke, fire, and blasted rock. The huge shelf of stone split free from the canyon wall and tumbled down toward the helpless warriors, burying some in the cloud of debris and carrying the rest to doom on the rocks a hundred feet below. Several breaths passed before the sound of the explosions—stunning eruption of noise that bellowed and rumbled through the canyon like a violent thunderstorm—reached the watchers on top of the cliff.

“You placed charges there?” Dayr asked in astonishment. “You didn't trust the truce?”

The marshal shrugged. “Captain Powell made the arrangements. The red flag was the signal to light the fuses,” he said.

Debris continued to tumble downward, an avalanche of stone and gravel and dust that swept the cliff and the winding trail clean of goblins. So great was the destruction that, in many places, the entire pathway was carved away from the cliff. A cloud of dust lingered for a long time, obscuring their view, but as it gradually settled toward the water, it became clear that not a single one of the enemy warriors had survived the blast.

General Dayr wondered aloud. “The black powder is precious ... and the preparations are always extensive. Had you planted the explosives in case Ankhar betrayed you? Or ... you were planning to ignite those fuses all along?”

Jaymes looked at him, his expression cold and emotionless. “This is war,” he said curtly. “And the objective is to kill the enemy. I know this, and Ankhar knows this.”

And the war would go on.

THE ARMY OF SOLAMNIA

Jaymes ordered his army to concentrate all three wings on the west bank of the Vingaar south of the great fork in the middle of the plains. The generals put his orders into action while he himself traveled with only the two dozen Freemen of his personal guard. Captain Powell knew his commander well enough that, for the most part, the escorting knights rode several hundred yards behind Jaymes. The party followed the meandering course of the mighty river, so the lord marshal could enjoy a few days of relative leisure before immersing himself again in the complexities of command.

At last he turned the little roan mare due south, riding with purpose now. The column tightened up. The marshal passed the first pickets of the army camp some ten miles out. These veteran scouts, in leather armor with their fleet, long-legged steeds, were not surprised to see their leader riding across the flat steppe at the head of a small company. Even before they waved him through their outposts, the scouts detached galloping riders to carry word of the lord marshal's approach to the main camp.

Soon Jaymes could make out the vast spread of his army's tent city gathered around the officers' encampment, where plain brown domes rose above the lesser dwellings. Horse corrals were small, scattered among the units so the mounts were close to their riders. A large pasture, well guarded, had been established to the rear, where hundreds of cattle—used both as cargo haulers and food—grazed.

When the dukes had ruled these troops, each noble's tent had been a huge, colorful pavilion, with attendant dwellings for retainers, courtiers, and other key members of the ducal entourage. Whole wagon trains had been devoted to luxuries such as crystal dinner services, silk tablecloths, and padded thrones. A central part of the camp would typically have been set aside for formations, parades, jousting, and other elaborate games.

But those days were gone. Now the officers, from the generals down to the platoon captains, dwelled in nondescript shelters of the same nondescript denim—larger than the tents of the enlisted troops only insofar as space was needed for map tables, rosters, and signaling equipment. Undistinguished, perhaps, but they also made it difficult for an enemy to determine where they would find the important leaders of the Solamnic Army. As an added benefit, the common men in the line understood that their officers shared their living conditions, and this boosted morale.

Lord Marshal Jaymes had appointed his officers based upon their demonstration of military ability, not because of any accident of birth. True, his three army generals—Dayr of the Crowns, Markus of the Rose, and Rankin of the Swords—had been captains under the duke. Still, each had proved on the field that he was skilled and trustworthy; each merited the responsibility of his command.

The rank of lord marshal was new to the Solamnic military hierarchy. Jaymes had created it for himself after being awarded the united command two years earlier, when his steadfast leadership—as well as his discovery of explosive black powder—had saved Solamnia from Ankhar's horde. After the horde had been halted on the brink of attacking Caergoth, the nobles had had little choice but to reward their savior with supreme command. In the years since, Jaymes had slowly driven the invaders back, liberating Thelgaard and Garnet, finally clearing them from the entire reach west of the Vingaard.

Many of the men still referred to Jaymes as the Lord of the Rose, and he accepted the honorific when it was offered. Others called him the Lord of No Sign. For though his banner incorporated elements of all three orders of the knighthood, he was comfortable riding about in his plain woolen poncho, displaying no heraldry whatsoever.

Riding the roan at an amble, Jaymes made his way through the outer camp. These were the pikemen and archers who could form ranks in a matter of moments to defend the perimeter while the knights with their more elaborate accoutrement armored themselves and their horses before supplying reinforcements. He was recognized by many as he approached and accepted the salutes and cheers of his men with a gracious nod to the right and left, or the raising of his hand toward a man or a company of particular note.

Many of these men had won great victories for their marshal. The Vingaard pikemen and woodsmen from the mountains who wielded their long wooden pole arms with unflinching discipline, were often the first responders. Many a charge of warg-riding goblins had been broken by their iron will, and one regiment of pikemen served in each of the three armies. He rode now past the Southshore Longbows, deadly archers from across the coast of the Newsea. The dwarves of the Kaolyn Axers, not to be outdone, raised their foaming tankards aloft and roared a lusty toast to their commander, who politely declined the invitation to stop at the dwarven campfires for a friendly tankard or three.

As news of his arrival spread, men came streaming from the other encampments, adding their cheers. He came to the center of the great encampment, where the bulk of the knights were amassed. Though they were the backbone of the Solamnic Army, in actual numbers the knights formed only a small percentage of the troops. It was the pikemen who formed the battle lines, the archers who provided the covering fire, and the dwarf heavy infantry who would assemble squares to stand against any attack. Then and only then could the fleet and powerful horsemen of the knighthood fight with all their ability.

The marshal took time to greet some of the knights personally. He reached down to clasp the hands of several Caergoth Steelshields as he rode past. These were the Rose Knights who had carried the day when Jaymes had first struck north across the Garnet River, pushing Ankhar's army back from the position it had held for six months following the half-giant's initial, nearly triumphant campaign. Then there came the doughty veterans of the Newforge Regiment, Knights of the Sword who hailed from besieged Solanthus; they had pledged to lead the assault that would free their surrounded city. Just beyond them, standing in attention with their snow-pure steeds behind them, were the Crown Knights of the White Riders—the unit that had broken Ankhar's ogres so recently in the north, paving the way for this great concentration of force.

All in all, more than twelve thousand men were congregated here, and the army's commander could not help but be pleased by the sight of his army. His three generals awaited

him in the center of the camp. He dismounted, allowing his horse to be led away for rubdown by several eager young squires, and stretched the kinks of his four-day ride out of his back and shoulders. He joined the generals at their small fire, taking a seat on a small stool.

“Any urgent news?” Jaymes asked.

General Rankin acted as spokesman for the trio. “No word from Palanthas, nor from the Compound, my lord.”

“Regent du Chagne still prefers that his own legion guard the city, does he?” asked the marshal, shaking his head.

“Perhaps he is worried more about you than about Ankhar,” suggested General Dayr.

Jaymes smiled tightly. “Probably he *should* be worried about me. But I don’t have time for him now. Solanthus requires our attention, and we’ll have to make plans with the assets we currently have on the field.”

“That should give us plenty to work with,” declared Sir Markus Haum, the general of the Rose. He was a steadfast veteran with a very impressive mustache and had rejoined the army in the winter after narrowly surviving an attempt on his life. Among the three, Jaymes regarded him as his most trusted, capable field commander. “Our forces are spread within ten miles of this very spot, ready and willing to go where you send it, my Lord Marshal.”

Jaymes nodded. “What of the crossings? I presume Ankhar has them well guarded?”

“Aye, sir,” Dayr confirmed rather glumly. “He has pickets posted for a hundred miles north and south of here, with strong detachments at every ford.”

“We tried a probe with boats, as you ordered,” General Rankin said. “We sent three hundred scouts, all of them volunteers, across the wider part of the Vingaard, a score of miles downstream from here. Ankhar’s bastards waited until the boats were almost to shore, and then those damned ogres bombarded them with boulders. Most of the boats were sunk, and barely eighty men made it back to our bank alive.”

“Unsurprising,” Jaymes acknowledged. He had in fact expected a disastrous result with such an experiment, but he had to give the tactic a try. The loss of so many men was a steep cost, but it was a price he must pay in return for intelligence regarding his enemy’s dispositions. “Has there been any word from Solanthus?”

“The last messenger to make it through the siege lines arrived more than a month ago. We’ve tried to send men in, but sporadic reports—by homing pigeon—indicate that none of them have made it through. There’s a cloud of magic around that place, no doubt caused by the Cleft Spires. Though it blocks our scrying attempts, it is also an asset—for it certainly protects the city against the magic of Ankhar’s Thorn Knights as well.

“So Solanthus is still holding out. Discipline and morale are reportedly good, my lord, but the shortage of food is becoming the worst predicament. Most of the food is going to the fighting men, of course, so the suffering is greatest among the citizenry. It will not be long before the youngest and oldest citizens will be starving to death.”

“And the duchess herself?”

“She pleads for help, as soon as possible. But she also promises to hold out until we can break the siege,” reported Rankin. “She’s but a slip of a thing, and ... well ... when she married Duke Rathskell, we all made assumptions about her that have turned out to be wrong. By the gods—my men and I respect her now. We should be there with her!”

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