

# **To the Honour of the Kings**

**By**

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Published by AWL Media

74 Fletcher Street

Edgeworth NSW 2285

Australia

Website: [www.ReflectiveBubble.com](http://www.ReflectiveBubble.com)

First printed August 2011

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National Library of Australia Cataloguing-in-Publication entry

Author: Jarman, Wayne.

Title: To the honour of the kings / written by Wayne Jarman.

Edition: 1st ed.

ISBN: 9780987093110 (pbk.)

Dewey Number: A823.4

ISBN 978-0-9870931-1-0

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(Personal Development / Success)

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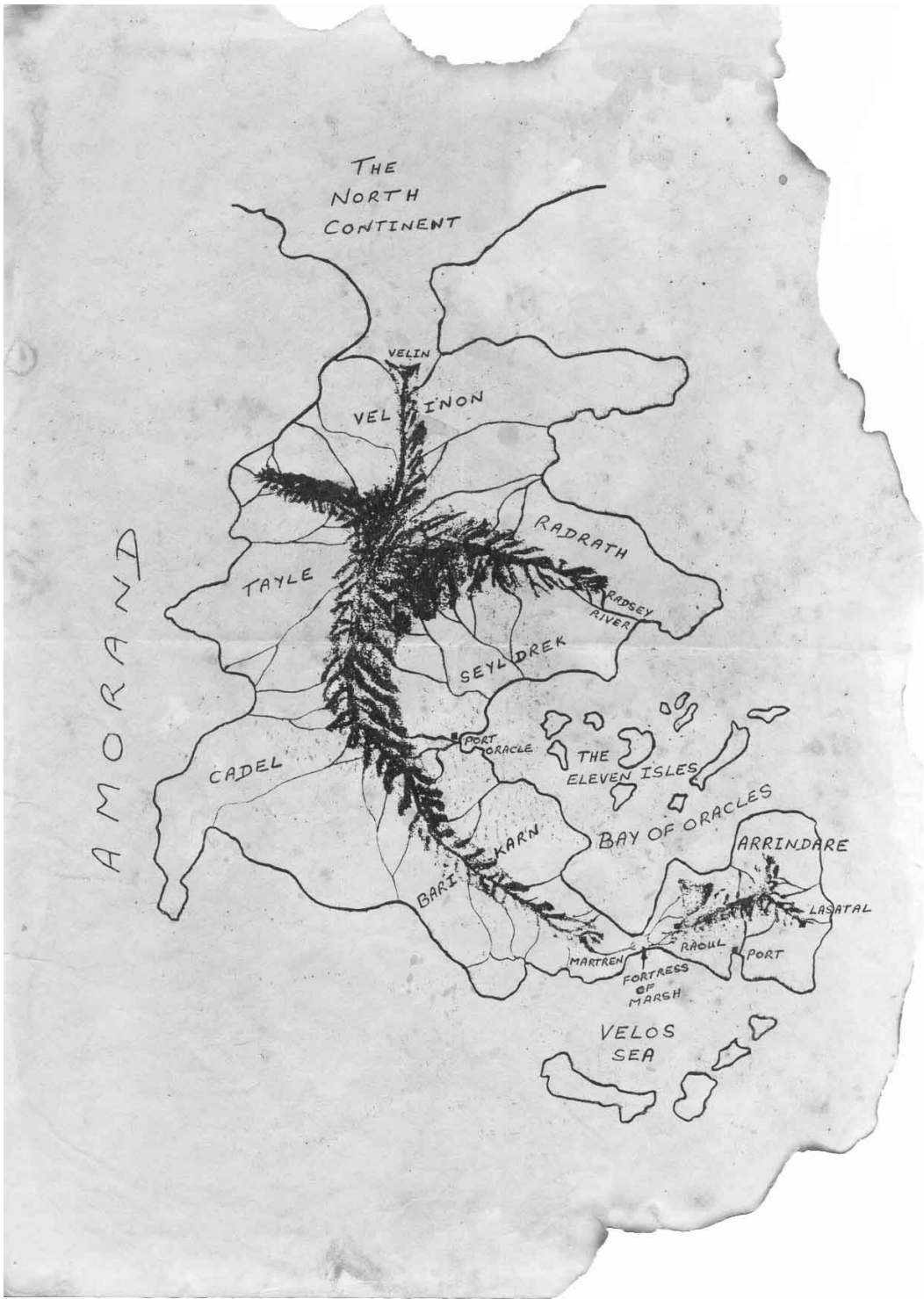
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**To My Loving Parents,  
Jean and George,  
for providing me with an  
education to live a life ... rather  
than just to earn a living.**

**Thank You.**



## THROUGH THE FORTRESS

The four reined their mounts to a halt.

They had left the fortified city of Martren almost two hours ago and had finally descended out of the early morning mountain mist. After what had seemed an eternity in an unreal world of mist and shadowy forest, the vivid colours that met their eyes seemed just as unnatural.

From the rock outcrop, the travellers could view directly down the heavily forested mountain and out onto the Bay of Oracles, with the greenness of The Eleven Isles. Scanning further south, they looked over their own land of Arrindare, and then out to the Velos Sea and its dangerous reefs and islands.

After months of travelling, they were finally in sight of their homeland and within days of their journey's end. While there was some exaltation in that sight, their feelings were dulled by the failure of their mission.

Indeed, the mocking tones of King Raynor of Barikarn still echoed in their ears. He had scoffed at their suggestions that the Dark Emperor was preparing for war. He had called them 'Alarmists' and accused them of 'going about the countryside frightening women and young children.' His only concession had been to allow the armies of 'weaker Kings from the north to scamper across Barikarn to hide in Arrindare'. At least *that* was a worthwhile outcome. King Tyne of Velinon (the most northern Kingdom of the Southern Continent of Amorand) had shown an interest in moving his army south if the Dark Emperor crossed their shared boundary. He was the only King of the six to give any credence to their warning.

Their stop on the outcrop was brief. The four riders had a long, difficult day's travel ahead of them, through the Fortress of Marsh and eventually to the fortifications at Raoul where they could rest for the night. It would be another two days before they reached their final destination, the fortified city of Lasatal, the seat of power of the King of Arrindare.

They moved on in single file with Magnor leading the foursome. He did not look the most likely choice for such a position in this hostile terrain. Although he was well veiled in his brown cloak and hood, the wisps of thin white hair that fell across his face and his long white beard signified a man of great age. He was not large in stature and his face was deeply creviced and weather-beaten. All other facial features were overridden by his deep, green eyes. Apart from his shadowed face, the only visible parts of Magnor were his two thin, bony hands straining to control the massive grey horse that he was guiding down the mountain.

Only those who knew of Magnor knew of the power in those old hands. Magnor had been the King's personal guard in Arrindare for over forty years. He had protected and advised the old King Fenore and now protected and advised that King's son, King Daroyd. He was master of all forms of combat and, even at his present age, was capable of dealing with most adversaries.

Of the four, he was the obvious choice for lead rider.

King Daroyd followed close behind. In his late thirties, Daroyd had assumed the throne on his father's death only two years ago. Even before then, spies had been reporting on the Dark Emperor's preparation for war. To Daroyd, being a King had so far meant nothing more than worrying and planning to repel the assault that he was sure would come. Consequently, he did not look a well man. He was prematurely greying and he always appeared to be overwrought. This situation bewildered the third rider. Prince Stefarme saw no meaning in his father's behaviour. He considered this whole journey to be futile and, in fact, had told them so at every opportunity, between grumbling about the various hardships that they had encountered on the way.

Stefarme was the eldest son and, therefore, heir to the throne. His idea of being King varied greatly from his father's behaviour since assuming the throne. He had often told his parents (during arguments over the perceived threat from the Dark Emperor) how *he* would live the life of a noble and powerful King.

The last rider was Prince Gwaine, Stefarne's younger brother. Gwaine, like Magnor, seemed a strange choice for a guard position in a hostile countryside. He was not yet eighteen and of slender build. If anyone looked least like a warrior, it was Gwaine. He was, however, Magnor's pupil and had earned some reputation with the sword and bow and was therefore placed at the rear of the column.

The four rode in silence. After spending so long in each other's company there was very little left to talk about, and the ineffectiveness of their journey had left them depressed and unwilling to talk, even if there had been a subject that had not been exhausted.

An hour later they reached the base of the mountain and found the track that would lead them home.

'Now I'm starting to feel better,' the King remarked, putting on a cheerful show. 'This road leads to paradise.'

'You've got to get through that smelly bog yet.' Stefarne could always be counted on for a deflating comment.

Magnor spun his horse around angrily. 'That *smelly bog*, my Lord Stefarne, has been the saviour of our land for centuries. It has kept many an army at bay. Without the Fortress of Marsh, you would not have been born a Crown Prince. Some foreign King would be sitting on the throne at Lasatal.'

Stefarne's voice assumed the high and mighty attitude of a Crown Prince. 'I am not disputing the defensive attributes or the historical significance of the marsh, my Lord Magnor. I am merely stating that it is a smelly bog.'

Magnor gave up, shook his head and turned his horse in the direction of the Fortress of Marsh. Magnor and Stefarne had never been able to get along. As Crown Prince, Stefarne should have been trained in defence by Magnor, but Stefarne had considered it below his station to carry arms. Besides, he abhorred

violence. After two attempted lessons, all sides had given it up as a dead loss. There had been animosity and general disdain between them ever since.

‘Well, regardless of the smell Stefarne,’ the King continued undaunted, ‘I shall be glad to cross into our lands and I will wash the smell away tonight in Raoul. What say you Gwaine?’

‘We have been away too long, father. I would put up with much more than the smell of the marsh to see home again.’ Gwaine’s answer was sincere. He loved his home and did not care much for the other six Kings of Amorand. Nor was he comfortable in the presence of any of the Princes and Princesses. He would happily return home and never cross his border again, if only the outside world would leave him alone.

At midday they were within two kilometres of the marsh. The ground was sloping down to the low-lying peninsula that was the neck and boundary of their land. Here, three freshwater rivers met the salt water of the sea that shallowly covered the marsh. The resulting expanse of nature was a unique environment that offered more challenges to the traveller than just nasal tolerance.

Where the salt water lay undisturbed by the movement of the freshwater currents, marsh trees and plants grew, brackish putrid mud sucked at every moving muscle, and insects swarmed. Snakes were prevalent in these areas and the occasional shark had been seen in the areas closer to the coast.

Where the freshwater reduced the salinity of the water flow, forests of trees flourished. While this was an easier climate to tolerate, it did provide other hazards, such as large areas of quicksand, snakes and the occasional crocodile.

An army attacking through this terrain would be at the mercy of a defending army of bowmen hiding in the trees and brush. This terrain, combined with the severely cliffed coastline of the remainder of Arrindare, had kept Arrindare impenetrable since the beginning of recorded history.



‘Before the smell becomes too great for Stefarne,’ the King announced, ‘we shall break for lunch.’

All four dismounted and moved to the side of the track.

‘At least King Raynor was courteous enough to have his servants pack us some food.’ Stefarne was already seated and chewing into a piece of meat. ‘The way he stormed out of our meeting last night, I didn’t think he would bother.’

The other three were still getting seated and preparing to unwrap their food parcels.

‘Yes he was rather annoyed,’ remarked Gwaine, with a quick wink at Magnor. ‘I hope it’s not poisoned.’

The coughing and spluttering that erupted from Stefarne brought howls of laughter from Gwaine and Magnor. Even King Daroyd couldn’t hold back a chuckle, though he tried to cover it up with a cough.

‘That’s not funny,’ Stefarne protested, trying to recover some princely composure. ‘When will you grow up, Gwaine?’

Gwaine was still recovering from his laughter. ‘I don’t know, my Lord. I must be a dreadful trial.’ He had intended the statement to have some element of contrition in it, but the uncontrollable humour in his voice spoilt it.

‘You certainly are,’ came the icy, Crown-Princely reply, before Stefarne went into a sulk.

Nothing more was said over lunch, each traveller lost in his own thoughts. When they had finished eating, they all, without command or communication, climbed back into the saddle. It was the discipline of months of pushing to reach a goal, the common urgency of their mission.

They rode on toward the marsh.

Before long the sun had been obliterated by the foliage of a dense forest. The river that flowed from Martren to the Fortress of Marsh was on their right, though it could no longer be recognised as a river. This was a transitional area where river flowed without the constraints of banks and eventually became marsh.

As they moved deeper into the forest, the ground became more saturated with water and a heavy mist that had earlier hung in the trees moved down to almost head height.

The horses sludged on.

A little further on, the travellers met with what was left of the Martren River. The horses were now struggling to stay upright. They were sliding on a slimy, hard surface that was often covered by as much as a metre of water.

‘Time to dismount,’ announced Magnor. His voice sounded strangely dull in this heavy atmosphere and the command was immediately joined by a chorus of shrill screams from a flock of waterfowl that flew off in fright.

The hackles on Gwaine’s neck stood up with the sound. He slowly shifted his weight in the saddle and steadied his mount before lowering himself into the water. It was freezing cold. As he planted his weight onto the slimy ground, he slipped slightly and grabbed his saddle for balance. The horse slipped a little and then they both corrected and took their own weights.

There was an almighty splash.

*‘Damnation! ...Vile Bog!’* Stefarne had fallen in and was now coughing and spluttering and cursing all at the one time. *‘Putrid, vile bog! ...It’s freezing! I’ll die of the coughing sickness before we reach Raoul.’*

Gwaine lowered his eyes toward the water, shook his head despondently and prayed. ‘Why God? Why Stefarne? Anybody but Stefarne. I would have happily fallen in myself rather than listen to him moan all the way to Raoul.’

*'Cursed Marsh! ...Ridiculous mission anyway.'* Stefarne was standing in the water completely soaked and totally out of control. In frustration, he twisted the upper half of his body to slap the water's surface with his hand while he let forth a guttural growl. It was enough to upset his foothold on the slime. He went down for a second time.

Gwaine leant slightly on the side of his horse, folded his arms across the saddle and buried his head in his arms. It had been a long, exhausting journey and there was still a long way to go.

Magnor and King Daroyd stood in silence and watched Stefarne re-emerge from the water.

*'Shall we continue now, Stefarne?'* the King asked calmly.

The second dunking had quelled the active side of Stefarne's temper. He took a deep breath that heaved his chest up and down to show his pent-up frustration, grabbed his horse's rein and moved off quickly. He passed Magnor and King Daroyd without uttering another sound. Several steps later he slipped again, this time only to his knees. He quickly regained his height, issued forth another deep, frustrated breath, straightened his back and shoulders and moved on much more carefully.

Magnor and King Daroyd moved off side by side, jointly shaking their heads after Stefarne. From his leaning position on the side of his horse, Gwaine could see a wry smile on the face of both men.

*'At least they've retained a sense of humour,'* he thought to himself.

He allowed them to move off into the mist before motivating himself into following them.

There was no longer any need to retain their formal column defence. They were now in their own land. Anyone following them could not do so quietly in this world

of mud and water and noisy birds. And how would they track them anyway? The water and deep mist would prove a successful handicap to the greatest of trackers.

Danger from the front could now be discounted as well. Ahead were the guards of their own army; those poor souls who spent weeks at a time in this terrain, turning back any travellers who were foolhardy enough to enter.

Arrindare was a closed land. No one entered unless they had permission of the King. As few outsiders as possible were allowed to travel any of the tracts that led safely through the Fortress of Marsh. The marsh was indeed their fortress. The secrecy of its safe paths was necessary for the continued survival of Arrindare, particularly if the Dark Emperor was preparing for war.

Gwaine trudged on through the watery expanse. He had always expected to be challenged but, when it finally came, it startled him and stopped him in his tracks.

‘Who goes there?’

The voice drifted across the mist from an unknown distance or direction.

Magnor answered the challenge. ‘The King of Kings’, he shouted into the mist that shrouded their vision.

Magnor would not have used this title outside of Arrindare. It was a particularly touchy subject with the other six Kings of Amorand that, within recorded history, the King of Arrindare had commanded respect and homage from all of the Kingdoms of Amorand. The title of ‘King of Kings’ had been bestowed upon the King of Arrindare during that golden era and the title had been used within Arrindare for the centuries that followed, regardless of the fact that none of the other Kings acknowledged its validity.

The four now stood motionless in the frigid water, waiting for a response from the mist. Eventually, the watery sound of someone wading toward them disrupted the silence. A short while later, a figure could be perceived through the mist. Taron,

Commander of the Fortress Guard, came into clear view and bowed before the four travellers.

‘Welcome home, my King. And my Lords.’

‘Thank you, Taron. It is good to be in Arrindare, though I will be much happier when we reach Raoul.’ The King gestured at the surrounding mist. ‘This is not my favourite part of our land.’

Taron replied with a laugh. He was young for his responsible position, but at the age of twenty-two he was confident of his ability and of his relationship with his King.

‘We shall soon have you warm and dry in Raoul, my Lord.’ Taron turned his attention to Stefarne. ‘I see that Prince Stefarne has tested the Martren waters.’

Stefarne ignored Taron’s friendly smile. ‘Can we kindly go through these formalities in Raoul. I’m freezing.’

‘Of course, my Lord. Your escort is waiting on dry land only a hundred metres from here. We have towels, though...’ Taron paused, looking at Stefarne’s soaked condition, ‘I am afraid that we cannot provide dry clothes until we reach Raoul.’

‘Of course not,’ snapped Stefarne. ‘I wouldn’t have expected anything so civilised in this blasted bog.’

Stefarne was walking before he had finished his sentence and was out of sight within seconds, though he could be heard wading through the water for much longer.

Gwaine’s temperament had undergone a change for the better the moment that he had recognised Taron. Though there was a difference in their ages, Taron and Gwaine had been close friends for as long as Gwaine could remember. Taron had been raised in the Court and trained as a warrior and commander by Magnor. Under Magnor’s caring wing, they had both suffered mental and physical stress, exhaustion, and pain in their efforts to prove themselves warriors.

Outside of Magnor's battle rooms, the two had earned a reputation for causing mischief and calamity wherever they went. Their friendship had been bonded by the cementing force of shared blame and shared discipline as Magnor and the King had both taken their turns at attempting to correct their errant behaviour.

When Taron invited them to follow Stefarne to the dry area of land, Gwaine moved immediately to his side. The two moved slowly, allowing the others to leave them behind in the mist. Finally, Gwaine broke the silence with a whispered question.

'Why is the Commander of the Fortress Guard getting his feet wet?'

Taron smiled. 'I heard a report that the Crown Prince was drowning in the waters of the Martren. Of course, being the loyal subject and soldier that I am, I dashed down here, without any regard for my own personal safety, only to find that he was quite safe ...and all the crocodiles had mysteriously died.'

Gwaine wasn't amused. 'Seriously, what has happened that you are at the front line?'

'Our defences are being probed,' Taron replied in a more serious tone. 'In the last two nights we have frightened off six travellers who would not answer our challenges. An unmarked ship sailed into the Bay of Oracles last night and anchored just out from the marsh. It stayed for less than an hour before leaving again - enough time to put assassins or spies ashore.'

'Have you found anything?'

'No, my Lord. We have found nothing.'

Gwaine studied his friend for a while before commenting. 'It doesn't mean that our defences are being probed. It could all be unrelated.'

'Yes, my Lord.' Taron sounded less than convinced. '...It could.'

They had stepped out of the water onto solid ground. Stefarne, Magnor and King Daroyd were already there, towelling their clothes to extract as much water as

possible. Six Arrindare Guards were standing with them. One offered Gwaine a towel and he, too, commenced extracting water from his clothes.

‘All a complete waste of time you know,’ boomed Stefarne. ‘We’ll be slipping and sliding in black, smelly mud within half an hour.’

Gwaine felt his spirits fall. Though he hated to admit it, Stefarne’s gloomy report was quite correct. There was still a long, demanding journey ahead of them before they reached Raoul.

When they had all given up the attempt to towel dry their clothes, Taron gave the command to mount. The band, now numbering eleven, climbed to the top of the ridge of dry land.

‘End of defence number one,’ Gwaine mumbled as they reached the summit and started descending the other side.

They were now entering a tract of the Fortress of Marsh that was actually marsh. There was no fresh water here. This was one of many salt water, stagnant wastelands that provided the barrier that kept Arrindare impenetrable.

The smell that struck them was repulsive. Black mud, rotting vegetable and animal tissue, and stagnant water all combined to generate a smell that had to be smelt to be believed.

Taron led the band in single file. For as long as possible he kept them travelling on hard, packed mud so that they could ride. Eventually though, the mud became too deep and they had to dismount and move into the oozing black bog.

During the ride, Stefarne had found a captive audience to complain to, of his wet condition and the freezing cold. Consequently, as they dismounted, Gwaine found himself praying again. ‘Please God, don’t let him fall over in the mud.’

The mist was lighter in this area, granting greater visibility in choosing a path that could lead, eventually, to firm ground. Taron knew his area well, but the firm mud was rare and he could provide little relief for his weary travellers. They trudged on,

the mud gripping and holding their feet and arms and then sticking to them as they struggled free, so that their limbs were never free of its weight. They dragged themselves and their horses through four kilometres of mud and swarming insects before climbing another ridge of dry land.

All eleven fell to the ground, exhausted. Gwaine peered back, over the insect infested pit of mud and then looked wearily across to Taron.

‘God save any army that attacks over this terrain.’

Taron scoffed. ‘No army should wait to be saved by superstition. Any army attacking through here had better be prepared for eternal darkness.’

Gwaine had forgotten that his beliefs varied from Taron’s on the subject of whether there was, or was not, a God.

As they all struggled to their feet, Gwaine peered back once more. ‘End of defence number two,’ he mumbled to himself.

Taron overheard his comment. ‘Only one more defence to go my Lord. It will be easy from here, ...across the freshwater forest of the Raoul Rivers and then on to Raoul.’

Again they waded through icy water, carefully searching for safe footing on the slimy ground. Taron had been correct though. It was easier now. They even took the opportunity to wash away the mud. Apart from their meeting with a lone crocodile, this part of the journey was uneventful. They had managed to frighten it off by yelling and bashing the water with their shields. Stefarne’s concerted effort in screaming loudest and jumping up and down in the water provided some jovial discussion to lighten the subsequent kilometres to the edge of the marsh.

Eventually, they climbed out of the Fortress of Marsh and out of the eternal mist in time to see the last rays of light fading on the horizon. They had taken almost six hours to cross the twelve kilometres of marsh.



A firm, dry track lay at their feet, pointing the way to their day's goal. Four hours later they were within the fortifications of Raoul.

## LAS BATAL

It was mid-morning when the four met over breakfast. If they had risen early and travelled all day they could have been in Lasatal by nightfall, but they had always planned an easy two-day ride from Raoul. They had known, all too well, how demanding the Fortress of Marsh was to cross and how they would need this rest.

Gwaine left the table and walked to the window. They had arrived last night in darkness and had only taken time for a bath and some food before making their way to bed. By the light of day, Gwaine now studied the city and battlements of Raoul.

This city fortress was set at the junction of two arms of the mountain range that stretched down the centre of Arrindare. The peaceful city spread down the mountains, overlooking two arms of the Raoul River that ran in the valley below. It was a picturesque sight, with views of the Bay of Oracles, The Eleven Isles, and the lands of Barikarn and Seyldrek. The massive stone battlements stood defiant, contrasted against the intense blues and greens of the water and forests that they surveyed.

Gwaine smiled at the irony. The battlements of Raoul had been built, repaired, redesigned and restructured again and again over centuries of recorded history but had never been needed. The fortress that nature had built at the neck of the country, ‘that smelly bog’, had done its job over those centuries with no maintenance necessary while these man-made walls had cost a fortune and a permanent garrison of soldiers to maintain them in a defensible condition.

‘Excellent day, Gwaine.’ The King’s voice woke Gwaine from his thoughts.

‘Yes, Sire. Unusually warm for this time of year. It should be a pleasant ride to Port.’

Conversation resumed at the table, while Gwaine’s thoughts turned to Port. He had noticed that other lands had named their shipping ports by using the word ‘Port’ to prefix another name, such as the large city of Port Oracle in the land of

Seyldrek. To a land such as Arrindare, with its sheer cliff coastline, this was unnecessary. Port was the only land formation on the coastline that could be reasonably used to harbour ships and, therefore, a more distinctive name had been considered unnecessary by those early fishermen who had founded the settlement.

Even in this so-called port, the freight was unloaded from the ships by hoisting mechanisms that dragged the imported goods up the sheer cliff. The reverse process of loading for export was similar, but much more difficult to manage. Like the rest of Arrindare, Port was closed to all but natives of the land. The treacherous Velos Sea, with its unpredictable and sudden temperament changes and its submerged reefs, kept all but the Arrindare captains well clear of their coastline and even they occasionally came to grief.

At Port, even the forces of nature had not been able to make much of an impression on the sheer volcanic rock of Arrindare's coast. The Port River flowed to meet the Velos Sea only by leaping from the cliffs as great waterfalls that made the traffic of ships in the port even more chaotic and dangerous.

'Your escort is ready to leave when you are, Sire.' This time it was Taron's voice that broke Gwaine's thoughts.

'Excellent, Taron. I am refreshed, rested and well fed. I even feel like a King again. Let us move on to Port and one day closer to Lasatal.'

The breakfast party rose with the King. The small gathering of senior members of the court of Raoul followed the King and his companions as they made their way to the courtyard where a carriage and twenty mounted guards were waiting.

Stefarne and the King mounted the carriage while Gwaine and Magnor, preferring to ride, were assisted by attendants into the saddle.

The parade moved through the city to the cheers and greetings of its inhabitants and then down the steep mountain track. To Gwaine's surprise and delight, Taron led the soldiers.

Later, as Magnor was riding beside the carriage, near his King, Gwaine spurred his horse to join his friend at the head of the column. 'How did you wangle a trip to Lasatal?' Gwaine knew his friend's preference for Lasatal over Raoul.

'A Commander of the Fortress Guard has some influence you know.'

'Nonsense. He's just a glorified mudfish.' Gwaine was enjoying himself. It was a glorious day and he had now found good company.

Taron laughed. 'If you could have seen the expression on the half-drowned mudfish that I dragged out of the marsh yesterday, you wouldn't be so cocky.'

'I'll have you know, Commander, that I was in full control of the situation yesterday and I didn't really need your rather trifling assistance.'

Taron merely smiled and made no reply.

Gwaine looked across at his friend, realising that Taron had left the conversation, and searched for a new subject for discussion. 'I hate to be the bearer of bad news, my friend, but you're going the wrong way.'

The column had reached the base of the mountain and was moving along the path that led back to the Fortress of Marsh.

'Yes, it's a nuisance having to travel all this distance in the wrong direction, but some addle-brained Warlord built Raoul on a mountain range that we now have to travel around.'

'Careful!' Gwaine's voice had taken on a pretence of sternness. 'That's one of my ancestors your calling addle-brained.'

'Yes,' replied Taron, 'and I must say that you're carrying on the tradition very well.'

'Oh, thank you very much!'

With light hearted conversation and a friend to share the ride with, it seemed to Gwaine that it took no time to cross the third and fourth arms of the Raoul River

and to travel over the flatland that led to Port. Even with a one-hour break for lunch, the column was settled into the royal lodgings at Port well before dinnertime.

There would have been an all-night party that night if the senior members of the court had their way, but the King was determined to be well rested for his last day of travel. A banquet supper with an extremely large number of speeches could not be avoided.

The next morning saw a light-hearted company crossing the Port River on the last leg of the journey. The weather had returned to what was normal for this time of year. The sky was permanently overcast and an icy wind blew from the snow-capped mountain range on their left. But the weather could not dampen their spirits. Even Stefarne, despite his cold, seemed in a good mood.

Magnor rode beside the carriage that carried his King and Stefarne, while Gwaine had taken up permanent residence beside Taron at the head of the column.

The entire trip from Raoul had been uneventful. For his part, Gwaine was sorry that this particular stage of the journey was coming to an end. It had been refreshing to ride the flatland of his own country beside his friend. The last two days had helped to blur some of the worst memories of hardship and despondency of their fruitless mission.

Lasatal was now in sight. Sitting high up the mountain at the very tip of the mountain range, it looked like some giant dog peering out to the eastern sea, out to the fabled eastern land of Parrin.

A garrison of soldiers could be seen forming a guard of honour at the base of the mountain. Five hundred soldiers dressed in black, lined either side of the path that led to the gates of the city of Lasatal.

When the King and his escort were within one hundred metres of the beginning of the guard of honour, a chorus of trumpets echoed across the mountain and the

King's banner was lifted into the air by a mounted soldier as he charged in full gallop toward the King's escort. At the halfway point between the King and the honour guard he suddenly reined his mount and drove the spear end of the banner into the ground so that it stood upright and waved in the icy gusts of wind. The soldier wheeled his horse and rode back toward the guard.

Before Taron had stopped the escort, Gwaine had fallen back several metres behind his friend so that Taron was now alone at the head of the column.

When the banner bearer had returned to the guard of honour and taken his position in the line, Taron moved his horse forward, beginning a ritual whose origins had been lost in time. The motion now was slow and deliberate, in direct contrast to the way the banner had been delivered. Taron stopped his horse beside the banner and scanned the guard of honour, beginning with those soldiers closest to him and slowly advancing up the mountain until he was staring at the giant gates of Lasatal. There was absolute silence. That so many soldiers and horses and an entire population of a city could have been so quiet was a shock to the senses. Only the wind occasionally whistling about his ear kept Gwaine from believing that he had suddenly fallen deaf or into some dreamlike trance.

Only when he was certain that all were totally still and totally quiet did Taron reach out his left hand and grasp the thick carved handgrip of the wooden pole of the banner. The silence combined with Taron's deliberate movements made all to appear to be in suspended motion. The sound of the banner being wrenched from the ground was audible to Gwaine over those forty of fifty metres.

Having taken the weight of the banner, Taron slowly extended his arm upward to raise the banner to its full height. The King's banner fluttered violently in a sudden gust of wind but the sheer material made little sound.

Gwaine watched Taron's rib cage expand as he sucked in air in preparation for his oath. When the words finally came they were loud, slowly deliberate and intended to reach the deepest rooms of the castle of Lasatal.

‘To ...the ...Honour ...of ...the ...King.’

His shouted words were immediately echoed by every soldier and citizen on the mountain. The mountain erupted into screams, cheering, applause and the beating of five hundred swords onto five hundred shields. Gwaine’s startled horse reared slightly and then trotted backwards. Bringing his own mount under control, he then went to the aid of the King’s carriage driver who was having difficulty containing his horses.

Taron trotted his mount back to his column. He had little chance of moving back slowly as his horse, too, was startled and difficult to control. Nevertheless, the banner was passed to a soldier of the column without mishap and he and the banner then led the column up the mountain track between the two lines of the guard of honour.

As they passed the beginning of the guard, two banners, which until now had been touched to the ground, were raised to their full height. These were the regiment’s banners and, like the soldiers of the regiment, they bore no other colour than black.

This was the Last Regiment. The ancients of Arrindare, who had planned the defence of this land, had known that if the enemy came to Lasatal then it could only mean that all was lost, that all other regiments had been destroyed and that this was to be the last battle, or ‘Las Batal’ in the ancient tongue. Hence, the name of their city had been derived from a condensed version of that old tongue. The pledge of the Last Regiment was to die in honour, in order to preserve the honour of those regiments that had perished before them and to defend, to the last man, the King and the Royal Family.

‘Not a very cheery prospect,’ thought Gwaine. ‘No wonder the ancients decided on black as the Regiment’s colours.’

The column was well on its way up the mountain. The Last Regiment was at attention. While the cheers echoed from the city walls and from the people who had descended the mountain to greet their King, the men and horses of the Last

Regiment were perfectly still, having recovered from the pandemonium, and were on display for King Daroyd.

Gwaine, for the first time in the whole journey, felt shabby, His brown cape and hood had served as a coverall in forest and King's Court alike. But now, before the shining blackness of these soldiers, he felt the need to change into something that displayed his position in the court and his position in the land of Arrindare.

The column finally halted at the closed gates. Gwaine looked over his shoulder and saw that the two lines of the Last Regiment had moved onto the track and were facing up the mountain ready to move back into the city.

The heavy gates of Lasatal creaked and groaned as they were pushed open.

The first sight to greet Gwaine's eyes were the smiling faces of his mother and younger sister.

After such a long journey, Gwaine looked at his mother as if for the first time and realised why the reputation of her beauty had spread throughout Amorand. His sister, Ellorn, although only fifteen, was obviously going to be just as attractive.

Gwaine was surprised when the King brushed past his horse. His father walked briskly through the gates, threw his arms around the Queen, totally ruining her attempted curtsy, lifted her off the ground and spun her around in circles while kissing her on the cheek.

Laughter and renewed cheering erupted from the crowd.

Queen Lenore laughed and returned her husband's embrace. Ellorn, who had been forced to jump back to avoid injury, was now standing close to her parents looking amused, even if somewhat embarrassed at being so close to the centre of humour.

While Gwaine was enjoying the spontaneity of the moment, he was almost afraid to look over his shoulder at Stefarne. This would, surely, not be acceptable behaviour in Stefarne's eyes. Regardless of the fear that had overcome him, Gwaine decided that he had to look. He slowly leant forward in his saddle, with his folded



arms resting across the base of his horse's neck and, as casually as possible, turned his head to peer over his left shoulder. Stefarne had turned to stone. His face was a deathly mask of anger and disdain. He had gone red with what may have been embarrassment, or possibly high blood pressure. Stefarne spotted him and gave an ice-cold stare that wiped the smile from Gwaine's face and turned his head back toward the gate and his parents. He sat up in the saddle.

King Daroyd had released his bear hug hold on his Queen, though he still held her hand, and was now greeting Ellorn. He turned and waved to the crowd and then, placing his arm around Ellorn, started walking up the path through the city, toward his castle.

Gwaine's blood turned cold. His father's unexpected action had taken his guards by surprise. There wasn't a soldier within reach of the King. He threw himself off his horse, grasping his shield in flight, and ran after his parents. When he reached the gate Taron was at his side, sword in hand, and running at top speed. Within seconds, they pulled up on either side of the King, puffing with their sudden uphill exertion.

'I was wondering when you two would turn up.' King Daroyd was smiling and waving as he spoke. 'You know you shouldn't leave a King without a guard like that. It's very dangerous.'

Gwaine and Taron could only shake their heads and gasp for breath.

Gwaine looked over his shoulder and saw one of the soldiers tending to his and Taron's horses. He heard a twanging sound. Instinctively, he dived to his left and threw his shield in front of his father, where it clanged against Taron's shield. Gwaine felt the wind of the arrow as it narrowly missed his neck, passing to his right side. His blood chilled again as he urgently searched for Ellorn while losing his balance and falling against his father. She was unhurt.

By the time Gwaine, Taron, King Daroyd and Queen Lenore had recovered from their tangled heap, the would-be assassin had been slain. He had fired from a risen

area, so that the arrow, having missed its mark, had embedded itself harmlessly in the road.

King Daroyd was quite pale and his exuberance and light heart had disappeared. He looked from Gwaine to Taron with a slight nod of his head that was obviously meant to say 'thank you'.

'A King should never be frivolous.' King Daroyd looked unwell as his words came in a gust of despondency.

Gwaine gasped for breath as he tried to think of a response.

'On the contrary, my Lord. If a King cannot be frivolous, then it paints a gloomy outlook for the rest of the world. It was merely your timing that was wrong.'

A faint, forced smile appeared on King Daroyd's lips.

Magnor had taken charge of the situation. Soldiers searched houses and the crowd for any other aliens. The King's carriage was brought forward, with Stefarne still seated, and the guard doubled around it, while Taron's and Gwaine's horses were delivered to them.

The King's carriage, surrounded by soldiers, and carrying the King and Queen, Stefarne and Ellorn, was already out of sight when Gwaine was preparing to mount his horse.

Magnor rode by and then, obviously remembering something, pulled his horse to a halt.

'One hour before sun-up, my Lord Gwaine, I want both you and Taron in my war room.' His manner was not good tempered. 'You both have a great deal to learn.' He spurred his horse after his King's carriage.

Gwaine looked around for Taron, who was giving final instructions to his soldiers. When he had finished, Gwaine waved and signalled for him to ride over.

They rode off together in silence, with six soldiers following, toward the fortified castle. Riding across the massive square, Gwaine turned to Taron.

‘We’re booked for hell at the usual time tomorrow morning.’

Taron continued looking ahead. ‘Oh, shit! Why didn’t I stay in Raoul?’

Gwaine veered to the left, to the castle steps, while Taron and his soldiers continued on to the barracks.

## TALK OF WAR

Taron and Gwaine met in Magnor's War Room before daylight, as they had been directed. To their surprise, Magnor was not there to meet them.

'This is unusual,' remarked Taron. He was warming up, swinging a large practice sword. The blade was made of a roughly rounded bar of iron. It couldn't cut, but it certainly stung when it contacted, as both Gwaine and Taron knew only too well. 'He's usually here abusing us for being late, even when we're on time.'

'Yes.' Gwaine reached for his practice sword and began his warm-up. 'I have heard that a messenger was allowed through the marsh yesterday and rode all night. There seems to be quite a gathering in the throne room.'

'Doesn't sound good. Perhaps the war has come.'

'Perhaps.' Gwaine's reply was rather absently directed at the ceiling as he reached for a war-shield from the dirty stone wall. Only torches lit the room and cast long shadows and a yellowish glow over the two figures and the strange assemblage of implements of war that littered the walls and floor of the dingy room. 'Nothing to concern mere soldiers. How do you wish to die?'

Gwaine's sudden change of subject was accompanied by a threatening posture as he brought the shield up to his chest and pointed the sword at Taron.

'Ah! The sign of a true friend. One who allows you to choose how he will kill you.' Taron was leaning casually on his sword with his left hand on his hip. 'If you must know, I would rather go quickly with an arrow, but I wouldn't think of choosing such a weapon now that you've gone to the trouble of gathering a sword and shield.'

Taron walked to the far wall and chose a shield.

‘You realise, after the way you chattered in my ear all the way from Raoul, I’m going to enjoy hitting you with this stick.’ Taron pointed his roughly shaped sword threateningly at Gwaine.

Gwaine laughed. ‘It only seemed that I was talking a lot because I said everything twice ...in the hope that some of it would penetrate your thick skull.’

Taron was smiling. ‘Come on, Warlord. Let’s see if you can fight as well as you talk.’

With that, Taron jumped forward and threw a massive blow at Gwaine’s shield that sent a deafening clang through the old chamber. Gwaine’s reply was instant. His blow against Taron’s shield joined the echo that was already ringing in their ears. Blow after blow resounded as they fought, defended and dived around the room. Five minutes later, Magnor called a halt as he entered the room. He ignored their sweat soaked condition and their gasping breaths.

‘One of the Dark Emperor’s armies has invaded Velinon.’ Magnor paused for effect. ‘...Six days ago.’

The announcement shouldn’t have come as a surprise. Gwaine had been trained since childhood in preparation for this war. Nevertheless, he was shocked now that the moment had actually arrived.

Magnor walked to a dimly lit table in the corner of the chamber. A plaster model of Amorand, approximately three metres square, had lain here for decades collecting dust. Taron and Gwaine joined him by the table.

‘King Tyne put up a token resistance while his people burnt as much of the crops as was possible in the time allowed. He is now retreating down the east coast. King Daroyd has sent commands to dispatch our fleet and messengers so that we can take the Velinon army aboard at Port Oracle.’

‘He’s unlikely to catch them in time,’ Gwaine interrupted. ‘They will probably be passed Port Oracle by then. King Tyne will come through the marsh.’

‘Yes. I agree. But it is worth a try. It would be better if they came through Port, rather than have fifteen thousand soldiers trudging single file through the marsh.’ Magnor wiped some of the dust off the east coast of Amorand, before continuing. ‘The Kings of Seyldrek and Radrath have joined their armies at their border and intend putting up a fight.’

‘Thirty thousand against seventy? It’s a waste of good soldiers. The doddering old fools.’ Gwaine had little respect for either King Bartak of Seyldrek or King Thale of Radrath. Both were old men who would prefer to fight and die in glory than plan a strategy to win.

‘Nevertheless, Gwaine, it will give us time to get King Tyne within our boundaries and to work on the other Kings. Perhaps, now, they will listen to our plans. Our journey may not have been futile after all.’

‘Why only one army of seventy thousand?’ Taron queried. ‘The Dark Emperor could have dispatched three that size and easily taken Amorand.’

‘He knows that he can take Amorand with one army. Our seven small armies are too dispersed to put up any concentrated opposition. He will take Amorand with one, use another as a second wave to take control of the population, and the third will stay at home to handle his domestic situation. It’s quite a sound plan.’

Gwaine had a great deal of respect for Magnor. At this critical point, he was still very matter-of-fact and totally level-headed.

‘So...’ Gwaine stopped. He was about to ask a question that seemed overly simplistic, but, having stopped and thought, he still couldn’t see the answer. He continued. ‘...What now?’

Magnor grinned. ‘Now, my young warriors, we shall wait for King Tyne to arrive. We shall wait for the response of the other Kings. We shall wait and see how Kings Bartak and Thale fair in their battle *and*’, Magnor’s voice became emphatic, ‘...we

shall continue to practice to be warriors, and wonder why we almost allowed our King to be assassinated in front of five hundred soldiers of the Last Regiment.'

Gwaine perceived that Magnor's temper had settled overnight and his use of the term 'we' meant that he was blaming himself for being caught off-guard as much as anybody else. He twisted his face into a perplexed grimace. 'Yes, that was a little awkward, wasn't it.'

Taron only bowed his head and waited for Magnor's verbal abuse.

'Yes. Very awkward,' Magnor replied dryly as he walked away from the table to the centre of the room. He turned and looked toward the floor in thought for some time before recommencing the discussion.

'Taron has told me of the unmarked ship near our shores, in the Bay of Oracles. Yesterday's attempted assassination proves, quite obviously, that spies and assassins have been put ashore. We must all take greater care.'

'Yes my Lord,' agreed Taron. 'I have increased the guard around the King and emphasised the danger. But, ...someone must also talk to the King. He cannot continue to take the sort of risks that he took yesterday.'

'Yes, Taron. I have already talked to the King. But, I said *we* must *all* take greater care.'

Silence fell on the room. Taron finally took the initiative. 'I'm sorry, my Lord. I don't understand.'

Magnor ignored Taron and turned to Gwaine. 'What did you think of the bowman's marksmanship yesterday?'

Gwaine smirked. 'Terrible, my Lord. He couldn't have hit the side of a barn.'

'I see.' Magnor looked toward the floor and scratched his hairy chin in thought. He seemed to be searching for, and studying, his own questions as if he had suddenly come across a point that he wasn't sure of but wanted to explore. 'Wouldn't you expect that if an assassin were selected and sent so far to penetrate

an enemy territory to dispatch someone who was a threat, ...that the assassin would be selected on his merits as a marksman? I mean, it seems stupid to send someone on such a trek if he lacked the ability to perform the final task.'

'Yes, my Lord,' Gwaine could see the logic in Magnor's words, but yesterday's events made this discussion seemingly useless. 'But ...the proof is in the final outcome. The Bowman would have missed even if Taron and I hadn't tripped all over the King.' Gwaine smiled as he saw the mental picture of himself, Taron, the King and the Queen all tangled in a heap on the ground.

'Exactly, Gwaine.' Magnor seemed to have reached an outcome in his own mind. He was now more confident in his speech. 'And where would the arrow have landed if you had not ...' tripped all over the King'?)'

'Oh well,' Gwaine projected a mental image in his mind's eye as he shrugged and smiled toward Magnor, '...I suppose you would finally be rid of your star pupil.'

'Surely, you're not suggesting,' interrupted Taron with wide eyes, 'that he was aiming at me.'

'Oh don't be ridiculous,' laughed Gwaine. 'Mudfish don't count.'

'It is my belief,' Magnor was talking loudly to regain control of the discussion and bring it back to a serious conclusion, 'that the King may not have been the target yesterday.'

The smile disappeared off Gwaine's face.

'I repeat,' Magnor continued, 'we must *all* take greater care. Particularly you Gwaine. The Dark Emperor knows, only too well, the value of the second Prince of Arrindare. The Dark Forces have been repelled countless times over the centuries by the control and authority of the Warlord over the armies of Amorand. Their last defeat, only two centuries ago, by Baradetch, was their greatest route. You are the Dark Emperor's greatest threat. You can do to him what Baradetch has done before you.'



Gwaine saw the opportunity to lighten the conversation and take some of the gravity off his shoulders. 'I must first learn how to fly, my Lord, and to travel faster than a beam of light, and to wield a magic sword, and to...'

'Enough!' Magnor was annoyed. 'You have scoffed at the legends without studying the facts. Yes, the legends boast great feats and what would seem to be miracles. They are simply things that you do not understand. Do not scoff at your own ignorance.' Magnor took a deep breath and quelled his temper.

'I'm glad you mentioned the sword, Gwaine.' Magnor's storm had passed and, as always, he now continued as if it had never happened. 'The sword is not magic, but it is made of a metal and an art that we cannot duplicate. The technology has been lost over the centuries. The legends say that it is sealed in a casket at the base of the Waterfall Hole in the Immortal Gardens. It would be an advantage if you possessed the Sword of Baradetch, ...not so much for the strength of metal as for the respect that it would command from the soldiers of all of the armies of Amorand and ...from the Kings.'

'Yes my Lord. I agree that, politically, I would do well to retrieve the sword. I once tried, but the Waterfall Hole was too deep. I do admit, though, that the legends are correct on that one point. There is a casket of some sort on the rock bottom.'

'Then try again. ...Try again!'

'Yes my Lord. I will.' Gwaine smiled. 'If the legends are correct, we should be able to sail to the magical land of Parrin, where Baradetch still lives, bring him back and make him dive for the sword himself.'

Gwaine thought for a moment that he might have annoyed his teacher again. He wasn't about to find out. Trumpeting resounded through the castle. The King was calling his court to the throne room. Magnor charged out without another word. Gwaine and Taron ran to their rooms to wash and change before joining the court.

## **IN THE RAOUL WATERS**

The King's announcement was that of war. Taron and Gwaine listened to the sobering news for a second time.

After the court had been informed of the new situation in Amorand, there were some decisions made on logistics. An army of fifteen thousand was about to arrive. It was now up to the King of Arrindare to provide shelter, food and weaponry for that army, and for the armies of the other Kings that everyone hoped would soon follow. The Royal Family of Velinon (King Tyne, Queen Kayla, Princess Tanya and Princess Susanne) also had to be welcomed and accommodated within the castle.

The decision that most affected Gwaine was that Taron, as Commander of the Fortress Guard, was to return immediately to Raoul in case the Velinon army came through Barikarn and the Fortress of Marsh.

Gwaine and Taron were not to be separated for long though. Four days later they met on the road to the Fortress of Marsh. Taron was travelling from Raoul, while Gwaine had ridden all night from Lasatal.

'Good morning, my Lord.' Taron was in a cheerful mood. The morning gave every indication of developing into a glorious day.

'Who told you that gibberish?' Gwaine snapped. Some of his response was a mock display of grumpiness, but there was a serious element to his foul mood.

'Aha!' Taron was not deterred. He knew his friend too well to back off. 'I bet you travelled all night, didn't you?'

Gwaine's only reply was a drop-dead look. He wasn't prepared to be trapped into conversation by such an obvious question.

Taron, Gwaine and their escort of twenty soldiers of the Fortress Guard rode on for another quarter of an hour before Taron tried again to improve his friend's humour.

'It looks like I'm the only one who will be smiling today. I know of fifteen thousand poor bastards who won't be very happy. They will soon be wishing that they had taken a nice, cosy sea voyage.'

Taron was referring to the soldiers of the Velinon army, which was sitting on the far side of the marsh, in Barikarn. They had passed Port Oracle before the messengers had reached them and King Tyne had refused to turn his army around.

Gwaine gave a half smile. 'Yes. I wouldn't like to be the fifteen thousandth soldier, trying to stay upright and walk in that mud.' Gwaine shook his head slowly as he pictured the image in his mind. 'Is everything prepared for them?'

'Yes, my Lord. Sections of your Fortress Guard moved into the marsh at midnight. They have formed two columns to mark a route for our guests. By now, the Royal Family of Velinon and their army should be moving into the Martren waters. In six hours time, they should start to emerge from our beautiful swamp.'

'And we shall be at the edge of the swamp in three hours.' Gwaine paused and took a deep breath. He was exhausted, but he'd had enough of being grumpy. 'At least the company will improve.'

Taron didn't understand. He gave Gwaine a quizzical look. 'My Lord?'

Gwaine smiled. 'Crocodiles make better conversation than mudfish.'

Taron laughed. 'And where is your escort my Lord? Surely you haven't travelled from Lasatal alone, after Magnor's warning?'

'No, I have not.' Gwaine felt warmed. It was good to have a friend who was concerned about his safety. Taron was Gwaine's only close friend. Others cared about his safety, but only because of his importance to the war effort. Members of his family were concerned too. But that was different. They were family. 'I

travelled with six soldiers of the Last Regiment. Before I caught up with you, I sent them to Raoul to collect what you had forgotten.'

Once again, Taron was having difficulty understanding his friend. 'What have I forgotten?' There was a hint of irritation in Taron's question. Gwaine was doubting his ability to organise.

'Did you remember to pack dry clothes for the Royal Family of Velinon?'

'No, my Lord, but they will be in Raoul within four hours of emerging from the swamp. Surely they can wait that long. They will want to bathe before changing into dry clothes.' Taron was, nevertheless, feeling somewhat remiss ...until he thought of a complication. He carried on in more confident terms. 'Anyway, where would they change?'

'Good question. That's why my escort is collecting the second thing that you forgot. ...A large tent, that will be erected as a change room.'

'I see.' Taron's ire had subsided. 'I'm almost afraid to ask, but how are your six soldiers going to carry this large tent from Raoul to the marsh?'

Gwaine smiled. 'In the third thing that you forgot. ...A closed-in carriage.'

Taron looked bemused. His forehead was knotted in thought. 'The plot thickens. Do you have a use for this closed-in carriage?'

'Oh yes, Commander. I am guessing that King Tyne will want to talk with my father as soon as possible. He will not want to stay in Raoul tonight. He will want to travel directly to Lasatal. ...This could be an extremely long day.'

Both Gwaine and Taron became involved in their own thoughts. It was some time before Gwaine broke the silence again.

'Did you hear the result of the battle in Seyldrek?'

'No my Lord. Though, I believe I could guess the outcome. The messenger came through here yesterday.'

‘Actually, King Thale and King Bartak faired much better than I would have expected. They met the Dark Emperor’s forces at the Radsey River. The Commander of the Dark Forces is Qarad - a formidable warrior according to reports of the battle, but he unwisely decided that superiority of numbers was going to win the day. He was right in the long run, but he paid a terrible price in numbers.’

‘They can afford to throw lives away. They have the numbers,’ Taron interjected.

‘Only to a point Taron. Our numbers are not too bad, if we can get all of the armies together. Anyway, the story is that Qarad’s seventy thousand attacked across the river while the thirty thousand of Thale’s and Bartak’s stayed on the bank and cut them down with arrows. In the final outcome, Thale and Bartak retreated still with twenty thousand men while only fifty thousand of Qarad’s soldiers remained.’

‘That is a much better outcome than we expected.’

‘Yes, but those ten thousand soldiers would have been better used here than lying dead at the Radsey. ...Anyway, our fleet is still at Port Oracle. They will wait there for Thale and Bartak and bring them and their combined army to Port.’

‘That’s another twenty thousand to combine with the force to defend the Fortress. We’re starting to look healthy, but those numbers will only allow us to defend. We could never counter-attack. The Dark Emperor would win eventually.’

Gwaine did not respond. Again, they both fell into their own thoughts. At one point, Gwaine thought of breaking the silence by asking if everything was in readiness at Raoul for King Tyne’s army. He didn’t. Taron would have organised tents, bedding and everything else that the Velinon soldiers would require. He decided not to insult his friend by asking the obvious. There was no more conversation until they met with soldiers of the Fortress Guard at the marsh.

‘What news?’ Taron questioned as he approached the soldiers.

‘The trumpets have announced that the front of the column is over half way, Commander.’

‘Excellent. They’re making good time.’ Taron was still riding. He had to shout his next command over his shoulder. ‘Carry on.’

Gwaine smirked. ‘Carry on? ...Carry on what? They’re standing around waiting. Is that an instruction from the Commander of the Fortress Guard? ...Carry on standing around!’ Gwaine laughed.

Taron continued looking ahead with no sign of amusement on his face. ‘Oh, shut up. I’m the Commander. I don’t *have* to make sense.’ Only after making that statement did he smile, and then, as if to make amends for telling his Prince to ‘shut up’, he tacked onto the end ‘...my Lord.’

They joined Taron’s subordinate officers in their makeshift camp. An hour and a half later, the six soldiers of the Last Regiment arrived with dry clothes, a large tent and a closed-in carriage. They immediately set-to erecting the tent. All the while, trumpets blared from the swamp, indicating the position of the front of the column - presumably containing the Royal Family of Velinon.

An hour later, the last trumpet blared its signal. King Tyne and his court were within half an hour of emerging from the swamp.

Gwaine gulped down the last of his hot drink and put his cup by the fire. ‘Come on, Taron. It’s time we got our feet wet.’

Taron looked shocked. ‘Pardon, my Lord?’

Gwaine was already throwing his saddle onto his horse. ‘I said, let’s go. We have to greet King Tyne.’

Taron was on his feet and walking toward his horse. He was confused. ‘Why don’t we greet him here? ...On dry land.’

‘Because King Tyne and his family are going to come trudging out of that swamp, ...exhausted, wet, cold and without a doubt, ill-tempered. I’m not game enough to greet them on dry ground, in dry clothes, enjoying myself by a warm fire.’ Gwaine was riding past Taron as he finished speaking. Taron was preparing to mount. A

short distance on, Gwaine reined his horse to a halt and looked back as Taron mounted. 'I would rather be a little wet and a little uncomfortable than chewed and spat out by an irate King.'

They rode toward the swamp and the icy waters of the Raoul Rivers. It wasn't long, however, before they were forced to dismount and walk their horses through knee deep water. Taron slid as he dismounted, but quickly regained his footing.

'Easy, Taron,' Gwaine said with a wry smile, 'I only said to get our feet wet. You always try to overdo things.'

'I assure you, Gwaine, that I will not try to overdo this instruction. I am in no mood for a swim.'

Gwaine was pleased that he and Taron were finally alone, if only to hear Taron use his name rather than continually calling him 'my Lord'.

They waded on, toward the point where they would meet the King.

'I have been meaning to ask, Gwaine, ...have you met Princess Tanya or Princess Susanne?' Taron's voice had lowered to almost a whisper.

'Yes. I have been introduced to both of them in the court of Velin.'

Taron waited for more information, but none came. 'Well?'

'Well ...what?'

Taron found Gwaine to be very exasperating sometimes. 'Well ...tell me more. I mean, boy to man, what are they like? Are they pleasant mannered? Are they attractive? You could give me some warning of what we're about to run into.'

Gwaine hadn't missed the 'boy to man' comment. He was quiet for some time, trying to decide whether he would be even more exasperating in retribution. He decided not to push his luck too far.

'They are both attractive. Though, after six hours in this swamp, I wouldn't expect to be knocked over by their beauty. Actually, Tanya is very attractive ...though,

pretty stuck up and unapproachable. She's the Crown Princess and she knows it, and, what's worse, she lets you know it. Susanne seems nice, but she's very shy. She doesn't say much.'

Taron was about to pass comment, but a watery sound from up ahead caught their attention. They moved through the mist toward the sound of conversation.

As they moved closer, figures became discernible in the mist. Soldiers of the Fortress Guard, soldiers of the Velinon Army, horses. Gwaine recognised the outline of King Tyne further back. Three female silhouettes were visible. The more mature figure was obviously Queen Kayla, but Gwaine could not tell which of the other two silhouettes was Tanya and which was Susanne.

As they moved closer, detail became clearer. King Tyne's black hair and black bushy beard were the first features that Gwaine recognised. He looked exhausted. Gwaine scanned the party. They all looked exhausted. King Tyne, Queen Kayla and Princess Susanne were all damp, with mud splashed over their clothes and faces and through their hair. Only Princess Tanya was clean of mud. The watery noise that Taron and Gwaine had heard had been Tanya slipping into the cold waters of the Raoul Rivers. She was the centre of attention at the moment, with her family and ladies of the court standing around her, trying to give some comfort. She was totally soaked. Water was running from the loose curls of her long brown hair as she clutched her saturated cloak pathetically around her body in a vain attempt to gain some warmth. Her bottom lip was trembling, probably both with cold and exhaustion, and she was shaking uncontrollably.

Gwaine was sorry for the unkind description he had given of her.

Taron and Gwaine were able to approach without really being noticed. Everyone was preoccupied with Princess Tanya. Gwaine considered interrupting by introducing himself and then thought better of it. In the end, he chose the informal approach. He directed his comment to Tanya. 'We have towels and dry clothes only fifteen minutes from here, my Lady. We will soon have you dry and comfortable.'



The party was surprised by Gwaine's voice. He had their attention. He gave Tanya a comforting smile and turned his attention to King Tyne as Tanya nodded a silent 'thank you'.

'I am Prince Gwaine. I suggest we leave our greetings until everybody is dry. Will you follow me.'

'Yes. Lead on.' King Tyne was keen to get out of this water and to have himself and his family in dry clothing.

Taron and Gwaine led the way back to the camp. Gwaine kept checking, over his shoulder, on Princess Tanya's condition. He didn't think that she was in any real danger, but she was obviously suffering from exposure to the cold and exhaustion. He couldn't help noticing, though, that she seemed much more attractive and more human in her present condition than she had ever appeared in all her court finery in Velinon.

Finally, they came to dry land and to the camp. The officers stood to attention as the party approached. The Royal Family was ushered into the tent and shown to the towels and dry clothing while Taron yelled commands for plenty of hot drinks.

The Royal Family of Velinon were soon seated, in dry clothes, in front of the fire, drinking hot brews. It still took some time for Princess Tanya to stop shaking. The officers had disappeared to exercise control over the soldiers who were now starting to emerge from the marsh.

When King Tyne appeared to be rested and comfortable, Gwaine bowed and re-introduced himself.

'I am Prince Gwaine, second son of King Daroyd of Arrindare. I travelled with my father during his recent visit to your court.' Gwaine paused for some sign of acknowledgement from the group but no glimmer of recognition or interest showed in any of the faces of the Royal Family of Velinon. '...I have been instructed to escort you and your family to Raoul and then...'

‘Is King Daroyd at Raoul?’ King Tyne interjected.

This was the question that Gwaine had anticipated. Taron, standing on the outskirts of the group, marvelled at the accuracy of Gwaine’s prediction.

‘No, my Lord. My father is at Lasatal.’

‘Then you will escort me to Lasatal. I must have urgent discussions with King Daroyd.’

‘Yes, my Lord. If that is your wish, then I will escort you to Lasatal. I must warn you though, that we will not arrive until tomorrow morning.’ The words struck home as Gwaine uttered them. He did not sleep last night and he would not sleep tonight.

‘Then so be it. I must talk to your father urgently.’ King Tyne hesitated and looked down to his family seated near the fire. The realisation had dawned that they would be too weary to ride with him all night, but he was reluctant to leave them.

Gwaine interrupted his indecision. ‘I have arranged a closed-in carriage for your comfort, my Lord. You may even be able to capture some sleep on the journey.’

‘Very good.’ The relief showed on King Tyne’s face. ‘My family and I will travel in your carriage to Lasatal. When can we leave?’

‘As soon as I can organise a fresh mount, my Lord.’ Gwaine looked toward Taron, who immediately bowed.

‘My horse is at your disposal, my Prince. I will rest yours and then ride him back to Raoul.’

‘Thank you, Commander. Will you also organise food and drink for the carriage.’

‘Yes, my Prince. They should be here any minute.’

Gwaine smiled. No one could organise as efficiently as his friend. He would have to remember to apologise for stirring him about the dry clothes.

The Royal Family were soon seated in the carriage, the food and drink had arrived and Gwaine and Taron had said their farewells.

‘You will see more of me after my birthday. I shall take up residence at Raoul.’  
Gwaine was shouting back to Taron as he rode off after the carriage and its escort.

‘I will look forward to that, my Lord. ...Try to get some sleep before you return.’

## AN EVENTFUL RETURN

Gwaine had already had more than enough of this journey. He was overtired. He looked across at the carriage where the Royal Family of Velinon were sleeping and envied their relative comfort.

‘Though,’ he thought, ‘they have travelled a difficult trail and they have crossed the Fortress of Marsh.’

Gwaine felt guilty at being envious when they had suffered so much. His thoughts turned to the Queen and Princesses. ‘It must have been very difficult for them.’

He shook his head in an effort to clear the cobwebs and cursed his wearied mind. His mind was now in that condition of exhaustion where he was no longer in control. Thoughts flowed, seemingly unconnected, with no effort from him and continued to flow regardless of his efforts to stop them. For every thought or feeling there was instantly a counter-thought or feeling that argued against the first.

His thoughts of envy and then of guilt at having felt envious were just a fraction of the chaos that his mind was weaving through. It seemed the more tired he became, the more frantic his mind became to remain active.

He peered around at the column of seventeen soldiers - eleven of the Fortress Guard and the six from the Last Regiment who had escorted him to Raoul.

‘At least those six will be as exhausted as I am. That’s some comfort.’ Hardly had the thought been ushered through the chambers of his mind, than a conflicting thought chased in brisk pursuit as if to run it down and destroy it. ‘That’s no comfort. It doesn’t help me, or them, that we are all exhausted together.’

Gwaine’s mind turned to the twelfth Fortress Guard, whom he had sent ahead to Lasatal to warn his father of the imminent arrival of King Tyne. He wished that he could ride just as swiftly toward Lasatal, to be in bed early, instead of riding at this leisurely pace. Gwaine waited. No contrary thought came. He sighed. At least he and his mind were in agreement about wanting to go to bed.

The last rays of daylight had disappeared over an hour ago. There were few clouds in the sky and a full moon was reflecting from the Port River only a hundred metres ahead.

As they moved into the river, Gwaine felt his horse shudder, balk a little and then regain its stride. He patted the animal's neck and smiled. 'What's wrong, O Noble Coward? Can't you take the cold?' As the river deepened, Gwaine leant to his right and stretched down to the water. He cupped handful after handful of the almost frozen liquid across the back of his neck and head.

Temporarily refreshed, he regained his position in his saddle and looked to his right to check that all was well with the carriage. One of the curtains was drawn back, and the amused smile on Princess Tanya's lips proved immediately that she had been watching his antics.

As Gwaine veered his mount closer to the carriage, his mind turned to the question of just how he would have looked; hanging almost upside-down from his horse while throwing water over his head. The decision was that he probably looked totally ridiculous, but he comforted himself with the image of Princess Tanya's ignoble condition after she had fallen into the Raoul River earlier in the day. Gwaine decided that they were now even. He gave Tanya a weary smile.

'Good evening, my Lady. Are you fully rested?'

Tanya's smile was warm and relaxed as she leant her arm on the carriage window and then her chin on her arm. Her eyes were drawn to the moon's reflection in the water as she whispered her reply. (Apparently the others were still asleep). 'I feel better, but I would still like to spend a night in a bed. ...When will we arrive in Lasatal?'

'Not until about two in the morning, my Lady.'

Tanya screwed her nose up at the thought of the long hours ahead. Her brow knotted in a look of tired despair. Gwaine tried to think of something comforting to say but it wasn't easy to find comfort from within his own tired despair.

'I know how you feel, my Lady. It is a long journey from the north, and the trek through the marsh is anything but easy. Just another six hours though, and your journey will be at an end. I am sure that my father will make the reception short and I am sure that my mother will have baths and beds prepared.'

Tanya gave a forced smile. She looked up from the waters of the Port River into Gwaine's eyes. 'You must be looking forward to bed even more than I am. When did you last sleep?'

It was a caring question that Gwaine would have liked to have answered immediately. He felt embarrassed at the delay as he prodded his mind into trying to recall his last sleep. He finally captured the vision of a night some time ago but, when he tried to pinpoint which day it was, his mind ran into a chaos of days and nights and hours upon hours of sleeplessness.

'My Lord...?' Tanya was prompting him, perhaps thinking that he was not going to answer her question.

Gwaine shook his head slowly. 'I'm sorry, my Lady. ...Two nights ago ...I think.'

Tanya studied his indecision for some time. When it appeared that he had settled on that answer, she continued.

'That's a long time without sleep. You should have stayed in Raoul and let someone else escort us.'

Gwaine felt irritated by the suggestion, but he wasn't sure why. He told himself that he was just tired, and anyway, Tanya probably wouldn't have realised his importance in the coming events of war and preparation for war. He tried not to let his irritation show when he spoke.

‘No, my Lady. I have been commanded to return with the King of Velinon. I must take part in the discussion of the war.’

Tanya sat up and gave Gwaine a wide-eyed look. ‘Why?’

It was not Tanya’s question that annoyed Gwaine, but the incredulous tone with which she had asked it. The tone of her question implied that she did not believe that someone like him should be involved in discussions between Kings. Gwaine was too tired to hide his temper. His words flowed in frigid anger.

‘Because I am the second born son of the King of Arrindare and because I obey the King’s command. Unless, of course, you have any objections to that.’

Gwaine instantly regretted his tiredness and his temper. Tanya was obviously taken aback and hurt by his rebuke, but she did not wilt as Gwaine expected she would. By the moonlight, Gwaine saw her cheeks flush before she leant forward and pulled the curtain closed. He was left staring at a plain blue cloth, feeling like some animal that had just ceased to be of interest to its master.

Gwaine shook his head slowly, rebuking himself for his ill-mannered temper, before prodding his horse forward and ahead of the carriage.

By the time they reached the east bank of the Port River, Gwaine was at the front of the column with six of his soldiers. The other soldiers were riding to the sides and behind the carriage in a protective pattern.

Until Gwaine had joined them, the soldiers had been having some discussion that had kept them all involved for some time, with regular outbursts of laughter interspersed with the conversation. However, all conversation ceased as Gwaine approached.

This had become the norm over the last few years but Gwaine still found it difficult to handle. The same thing had always happened to Stefarne, but Stefarne had accepted this situation as a compliment. ‘It’s a mark of respect,’ he had once told Gwaine, in a time when Gwaine was younger and naive enough to ask

questions of his brother. Thinking back now, Gwaine could never remember a time when he was naive enough to believe any of his brother's answers. He knew that he was not accepted by his soldiers. He was just a boy Prince in their eyes, and with the war moving closer by the minute, this was an area of real concern.

The column moved slowly toward Lasatal. Hours passed in silence and in a drowsy semiconscious dream world where Gwaine continued to fight his exhaustion and his frantic mind. He was sorry that he had hurt Princess Tanya. He would have preferred that they had been friends. But, in typical fashion, having thought this thought, his mind immediately put forward the alternative that it really didn't matter anyway. The war was coming. He would soon move to Raoul. There would be no time for friendships, only battles.

Gwaine was jolted out of his stupor. A bugle was sounding only a few hundred metres ahead of them. It was sounding an attack. The thunder of hoof beats and the scream of attacking soldiers froze Gwaine's blood. He turned to his soldiers and screamed at them with all the energy he could muster.

'Turn around. ...Protect the carriage.'

Turning himself, he spurred his horse toward the carriage yelling. 'Turn it around. Run for the mountains.'

The carriage driver began the turn but, even before he had done half of it, Gwaine knew that it was hopeless. His soldiers were now all around the carriage. He drew his sword and tore his shield from the side of his saddle and faced the oncoming assault. His soldiers did the same and joined at his side.

The attackers, in full flight, were now in view. To Gwaine's amazement, they were about fifty soldiers of the Last Regiment. Stefarne was in the lead. In his confusion, Gwaine tried to find an explanation for this turn of events. Perhaps a coup? Perhaps Stefarne had killed his father and taken the throne?



Stefarne and his fifty soldiers reined to a sudden stop. Stefarne was wearing a grin from ear to ear, but the captain of the unit looked distinctly embarrassed. Even before his mount had come to a halt, he was sending an apologetic grimace toward Gwaine.

Now that the fear had gone, Gwaine found himself in a rage. It was just one of Stefarne's stupid stunts. 'Stefarne, you idiot! What the...'

'Ho, little brother. Do you have the Royal Family of Velinon?'

It was King Tyne who replied. 'Who are you, and what do you want?'

Stefarne ignored the rage in King Tyne's voice. He looked past the King, to the Queen and Princesses who had emerged from the carriage. He dismounted and bowed to the King, though obviously taking more interest in Tanya and Susanne.

'I am Prince Stefarne, Crown Prince of Arrindare.'

'Did he say 'Clown Prince'?' It was Tanya's voice. She was looking at her mother but, by the volume of her question, it was obviously meant for Stefarne.

Stefarne was taken aback. He continued in a more subdued tone. 'I have brought this body of soldiers to escort you into Lasatal, in all the glory that is befitting the King of Velinon.'

'Is that any reason to scare my family half to death? What is the meaning of this charge?'

Stefarne smiled and bowed again. Gwaine couldn't help admiring his brother's confidence and bravado.

'The attack is a symbolic tribute to our combined might and to our imminent victory over the Dark Emperor.'

The sting had been taken out of King Tyne's temper. He could hardly roast this young Prince for offering him a tribute. Gwaine felt physically sick. No matter how stupid Stefarne's acts were, he always managed to talk his way out of trouble.

‘I think I’m going to be sick,’ was Tanya’s comment on the proceedings - again loud enough for all to hear. She was obviously furious, and prepared to tell everyone what she thought of events.

In scanning the chaos around the carriage, her eyes met Gwaine’s and she gave him a long furious stare. Gwaine tried to muster some sort of facial expression that would let Tanya know that they were on the same side. She darted a quick look at Stefarne and then returned to Gwaine. ‘You two *must* be brothers!’

Gwaine was hurt. Tanya, in associating him with Stefarne’s stupidity and gall, had offered him the greatest insult that he could possibly think of. He straightened himself in his saddle as Tanya turned and walked back to the carriage. As she placed her foot on the step to climb inside, she turned back to Gwaine.

‘And, unless you’re going to put yourself out of your misery, you had better put that sword away. Your little battle is over.’

She disappeared inside the carriage.

It wasn’t until then that Gwaine realised that he was still clutching his sword and shield. He put his sword away and looked for the saddle bracket that held his shield.

‘Well, on the contrary, I think Prince Gwaine was very brave.’

Gwaine looked up in surprise to see Queen Kayla perform a quick curtsy as she threw him a warm smile. Susanne, behind her mother, followed the Queen’s lead as she too curtsied and cast him a smile.

‘Thank you, my Ladies,’ Gwaine responded, with a restricted bow, as he fumbled to place his shield on its bracket.

The ladies turned and walked toward the carriage.

‘Very well, Prince Stefarne,’ King Tyne was getting back to business, ‘You have come here to escort us to Lasatal. Let’s get on with it. How much farther have we got to go?’

‘Less than an hour’s riding, your Majesty.’

‘Excellent. Then let’s go. As quickly as possible, ...seeing we are now all wide awake.’

With that command, King Tyne turned away and disappeared into the carriage.

Stefarne turned his horse and moved off in the direction of Lasatal. Gwaine waited for the command to move the soldiers into position and then on to Lasatal. It didn’t come. Stefarne just kept riding. Obviously, having been the centre of attention, Stefarne had now left the command of the soldiers to Gwaine.

Gwaine shook his head after his brother and looked across to his captain who was still looking quite apologetic and confused.

‘I’m sorry, Prince Gwaine. I...’

‘Forget it, Kem. I know my brother. Let’s get these men organised so that we can go home.’

‘Yes, my Lord.’

The captain organised his men and, in no time, Gwaine was riding next to him at the head of the enlarged column. The pace, now, was more to Gwaine’s liking. Not long now and he would be in his bed at Lasatal.

‘My Lord, I have been wanting to talk to you for some time.’

‘Yes, captain.’

The two were shouting at each other over the noise of their horse’s hoof beats and of the wind around their ears.

‘The war is close now. I want to be more involved than I will be in my present position. Can you arrange for me to be transferred to the Fortress Guard?’

‘I can...’ Gwaine paused for a while, searching for the right words. They didn’t come. ‘...but I won’t.’

Gwaine looked across at his companion. The disappointment was obvious. Kem, like Gwaine and Taron, had trained as a warrior under Magnor. Kem was now in his early thirties and had spent over ten years in the Last Regiment. Gwaine realised how difficult it would have been for a trained warrior to go through the motions of Palace Guard and ornamental soldier in the court of Lasatal for all those years.

‘When the battle for the Fortress has been fought, ask me again.’

Kem’s reply was emphatic. ‘Then I *will* ask you again, my Lord. ...May I ask why?’

‘Yes. ...Tomorrow.’ Gwaine would have liked to explain immediately but it was too difficult over the noise. He would explain to Kem tomorrow that he wanted some good officers in reserve in case the losses of the Fortress battle left him short of experienced officers.

In no time, Lasatal was in sight. The Last Regiment lined the road that led to the great gates. This time, the carriage did not stop for any banner ceremony, but continued up the hill at speed. The gates were already opened so that the column did not stop until it reached the steps of the palace.

The Royal Family of Velinon were ushered to the Throne Room of Lasatal. It was almost two in the morning, but the entire court of Lasatal was present in all its finery. Trumpets sounded as the Royal Family entered, with Gwaine following behind.

King Daroyd and Queen Lenore were seated at the far end of the massive room but, as the King and Queen and Princesses of Velinon approached they rose and walked down the seven steps to greet their visitors on their own level.

It was a warm greeting. Velinon and Arrindare were the only two countries of Amorand never to have fought against each other in war. Gwaine had long ago, during his history studies, decided that this was only because they were too far apart to make war a reasonable proposition for their small armies and small resources.

Finally, King Daroyd addressed the court. 'Now we are two. Soon we shall be seven, ...and then the Dark Emperor shall be thrown back to his evil land as he has been so often in the past. King Tyne has rushed here to tell us of the events, so far, of the war ...but, first, I shall make him rest. We shall meet here at midday tomorrow to discuss the war. You all may go to bed now.'

The court quietly broke up and moved off to their beds. Soon, only fourteen people remained in the room - the two Royal Families, Magnor and four soldiers.

'I hope you do not mind the delay, my friend.'

'No, King Daroyd. If we meet tomorrow at midday, we are still meeting much sooner than if I had spent the night in Raoul.' King Tyne tried to suppress a yawn. 'And I am exhausted. I will be pleased of a bath and a night's sleep.'

King Daroyd turned to his Queen. 'Then Lenore will show you to your rooms, where baths are already prepared.' He turned to Gwaine. 'Gwaine, ...Stefarne has suggested, that while we are meeting tomorrow, you can show Princess Tanya and Princess Susanne around the palace. Meet them here at eleven in the morning.'

Gwaine was stunned. He felt like saying 'What about the meeting? I should be there!' but he would have only made himself look even more foolish than he felt. He darted a look at Stefarne. Stefarne had obviously seen the animosity between Gwaine and Tanya. This was just his form of revenge. Why did his father always listen to Stefarne's suggestions? Stefarne had a smirk on his face. Gwaine looked at Tanya, expecting to see a broad grin and an 'I told you so' expression. Tanya only caught his gaze for a second before lowering her eyes to the floor and following Queen Lenore out of the room. He silently thanked her for that.

Within seconds only Magnor and Gwaine were left in the huge chamber.

Magnor gave Gwaine a knowing smile. He had never been easily fooled by Stefarne. 'I will tell you everything of the meeting. You will miss nothing.' He turned and left.

Gwaine suddenly felt exhaustion fall on his shoulders as he had never felt it before. He looked toward the ceiling and allowed his arms to fall limply at his sides before sighing deeply. At least the journey was over. He walked toward the far door shaking his head as he talked to the surrounding emptiness.

‘I don’t really give a damn. I’m going to bed.’