

## Chapter One: Arrivals

Each of the districts that made up the city of Alvagard, furthest outpost of the King's law in the realm of Alfinheim, had its own character. The air of elegance bordering on decadence in the architecture of the fine homes and paved boulevards of the Noble Quarter marked it as distinct from the overcrowded shanty dwellings and refuse-strewn streets of the Slums. Similarly the vibrant hub of the Market District, which was the setting of lively interchanges between often unscrupulous traders and their always unsuspecting patrons, contrasted sharply with the largely silent and empty streets of the Holy Quarter, which were dominated instead by the sombre facades of the many temples that lined them. The populations of each of these districts also tended to be quite distinct from each other, the deprived by and large living in the Slums and (if they could leave them) the Market District while the more well to do lived in the Noble and (in the case of the more devout among them) the Holy Quarters. On a day to day basis a certain amount of migration between these areas took place, for example an aristocrat might venture into the Market District in search of some trinket that could not be found in the shops of the Noble Quarter, or a charitable priest might visit the Slums in the hope of attracting converts to the Asatru Faith. The most infamous of the city's wards, however, was the Harbour District, whose inhabitants took a certain perverse pride in the fact that, with good reason, few of the residents of the rest of Alvagard ever ventured into their district.

Arnor would quite happily have counted himself among the ranks of those denizens of Alvagard who gave the Harbour District a wide berth were it not for the fact that his position as Captain of the City Watch seemed to bring him here uncommonly often. If he and his men were not summoned here to deal with a brawl that had broken out in the Seawatch Inn, the local den of ill-repute, then it was because a body had been found floating in the jetty, its demise, appearances notwithstanding, almost certain to be the result of foul play. Many people in Alvagard felt that, rather than waste the city's resources attempting to clean up the problems that the Harbour's denizens caused they should simply be left to their own devices, regardless of whether this meant that they tore each other, and their district, to pieces. Arnor himself might quite happily have ascribed to this philosophy were it not for one truth that neither he nor anyone else could deny. If the Market was the heart of the city's trading life, then the Harbour, which represented the only means of access to the port of Alvagard for merchants from overseas, was without doubt the pulmonary system that kept the city's lifeblood pumping. Unfortunately, the district's access to the sea was also a large part of the reason why there was an old saying in Alvagard, that when in the Harbour you must ensure that only the walls are behind you at all times, for that was the only way that you could avoid being stabbed in the back.

"Keep your back to the wall sir."

The voice came from behind Arnor, and given the train of his thoughts he might have been greatly perturbed by the timing of the comment if it were not for the fact that it was a voice that he recognized. Turning around he saw that it was Dagmar Fell, his sergeant, a great block of a man whose moustaches, grown long in the old style, were blond and heavily streaked with grey. His was a reassuring presence and Arnor regarded his last comment as sound advice in the circumstances. He had to be careful. If, as was commonly said, Alvagard was a city full of sharks right now he was sailing in the most dangerous waters of all.

"Rest easy sergeant," he said, "we're here on the Viceroy's business. The local scum should know better than to cause any trouble for us."

Dagmar gave him a sidelong glance.

“That’s the trouble sir, they usually don’t know any better. In any case,” said the sergeant, looking ahead again, “it wasn’t the locals that I was warning you about.”

Arnor simply nodded at that, unwilling to let Dagmar’s cryptic comments unsettle him. When had his sergeant become so philosophical anyway? Maybe it was just that the fact that they had been waiting here, in the Harbour District, for over an hour now was starting to get to him as well. Bad things tended to happen to those who lingered too long in the city’s docks after dark.

In other circumstances Arnor might have been minded to take a moment to appreciate what was a fine night. Here, as far as a man could get from the artificial lights of the city’s centre and still be in Alvagard, the night sky was a deeper shade of black. In it, numerous constellations of stars that were usually only visible in the countryside beyond the city were clear. Reared in the country himself, Arnor could easily identify the major star formations such as the Ancestor Oak, the Watchman and the Maiden as well as a dozen other minor constellations. His father had taken care to ensure that this was just as much a part of his training as swordsmanship, archery and riding, for in the wilds knowing where the stars were and where they led could mean the difference between life and death.

At that moment the stars were reflected back clearly in the waters beyond the pier on which they stood, as were the twin moons, white Alia and blue Ilith. Arnor noted that the waters were still tonight and that the docks, or this part of them at least, were quiet. The peaceful mood did nothing to calm his nerves, however. He would have preferred to be here in the daytime when the Harbour District was bustling with merchants and traders newly arrived from Middengard, Erkenlund or the western continent, its docks lined with ships being loaded or emptied of their burdens. This strange silence was troubling in contrast, for it seemed to be pregnant with the possibility of being disrupted, like the calm before a vicious storm.

But it was their purpose in being there that disturbed Arnor most of all.

He had been summoned earlier in the day by his commanding officer Lord Valten, Marshal of the City Watch, who had given him an unusual task to carry out. Arnor had been raised to his current post of Captain barely a month earlier, and he still found being in his Lord Marshal’s presence somewhat intimidating on the rare occasions on which he dealt with him personally. Most of the time Arnor dealt with his immediate superior Commander Corwin, who had also happened to be in the Lord Marshal’s chamber when he was summoned. The two men presented quite a contrast: fierce old Lord Valten, wide-shouldered and powerful, his back still ramrod straight in spite of his advancing years, was stood in front of his desk while the dishevelled, bearded form of Commander Corwin sat slumped in a chair behind it, a posture which merely served to emphasise his ever expanding gut.

Valten had looked up as soon as Arnor had entered, his bushy white eyebrows lowered as if in concentration and a frown upon his face. Seeing his expression Arnor had been glad that he had not tarried when he had received his summons; Valten did not look like he was in a good mood and had he been kept waiting Arnor doubted that it would have improved.

“Ah there’s the lad now,” he boomed. Valten had a strong voice, one that was used to barking out commands in the middle of a fight, and he had a tendency not to modify it even when he was not on the battlefield. “Captain... blast it what’s your name lad?”

“He’s Paul Arnor,” Corwin had said mildly, answering on Arnor’s behalf. Corwin rarely spoke in any other tone of voice. Strangely enough, it was a voice that was just as effective as Valten’s bass rumble in making men leap to obey him.

“Padreig’s boy,” Corwin had added then, in an aside to Valten.

“Ah yes of course,” said Valten, and for once his voice had softened. He had turned to Arnor then and said, “Your father was one of this kingdom’s heroes lad, and that’s not a term that I use lightly.”

Arnor had simply thanked Valten at that point, unsure of what his reaction should be. It was not the first time that he had received such a compliment, whether it was well intentioned or otherwise; not even the first time that he had received such a compliment from the Lord Marshal, notwithstanding his temporary memory lapse. He was happy enough to accept that others lauded Padreig Arnor; for himself his feelings towards his father were somewhat more complex and he had little desire to share them at that moment. So he had stayed silent, simply waiting for his superior officers to give him his orders.

“I have an important job for you young Arnor, a matter of some, shall we say, delicacy.” Valten had frowned then, as if he found what he had to say next distasteful, and paused.

Moments had then passed in which nothing was said and Arnor had grown increasingly uncomfortable as he had pondered the nature of the task that the Lord Marshal had lined up for him. Eventually it was the Commander that had broken the silence.

“You are aware that tomorrow is the beginning of Trademeet, Captain?”

Arnor gave a confirmatory nod in response. Trademeet was Alvagard’s major trade festival and he could hardly have avoided knowledge of it over the past few days, with the air of anticipation in the city mounting as it drew ever nearer. A Trademeet was a gathering of merchants, hawkers, peddlers and traders of all kinds in one place, which allowed them to simultaneously sell their wares to each other and whatever customers that they could deprive of their hard earned coin. Trademeets were commonly held every month in the cities further south but in a place that was as isolated as Alvagard they occurred more rarely, perhaps only on a seasonal basis. This made a Trademeet that much more special for the commoners of the city, as it afforded them a rare opportunity to buy goods that they would otherwise have had to travel many leagues to purchase, an expense that was usually well beyond the means of most of Alvagard’s residents. For this reason the three-day Trademeet festival was hotly anticipated by the city’s inhabitants and was regarded as more of a public holiday than an occasion for business by many.

“Well, then you will be aware that such an event inevitably draws large numbers of foreigners to the city,” continued Corwin, “and that of course presents its own problems.”

Arnor nodded again. He was well aware that, although the commoners of Alvagard mostly looked forward to Trademeet, the city’s authorities tended to have more mixed feelings towards it. On one hand the event brought trade to Alvagard, which was always welcome, and while it was the purses of foreign merchants that grew the fattest following Trademeet, Arnor knew enough to be aware that a sizeable chunk of the festival’s revenue tended to end up in the coffers of the Viceroy, the official who governed the city in the King’s name. Unfortunately, the festival also tended to attract a sizeable criminal element that came with the intention of selling illegal goods and carrying out other unsavoury activities under the cover of being honest traders. The large numbers of people that were in the city at such times made

these activities harder to detect and considerably harder to put a stop to, especially as many of the smugglers and racketeers who attended Trademeet had criminal connections within the city. This inevitably meant that, if they wanted to disappear, they could do so with minimal effort.

Arnor was one of those that secretly dreaded the coming Trademeet, as it always pushed his men to the limit. Even at the best of times the undermanned and under equipped City Watch was stretched thin when it came to carrying out their task of upholding the King's law in Alvagard. When Trademeet came their resources and abilities were pushed past breaking point. It was therefore with some apprehension that he now awaited his instructions from Corwin – the last thing that he and his men needed right now were extra duties on top of patrolling Trademeet.

“The Marshal and I have become aware in the past few days of a potential difficulty,” said Corwin, looking at this point at his superior, who still appeared lost in thought and seemed disinclined to speak. Taking his cue from Valten, Corwin continued, “There will be a ship arriving in the Harbour District at just after midnight tonight. You are to meet two of the passengers and escort them to their lodgings, ensuring that they come to no harm.”

Arnor had almost sighed in relief at that point, so modest was the scale of the task that was being requested of him in comparison with that which he had anticipated. As always with Corwin, however, there was a twist.

“You should know that the ship is inbound from Carne Caill,” the Commander had said, “and you are to meet it alone.”

“But sir,” Arnor had said in protest, “That is the most dangerous part of the city, especially after dark. You would be putting their lives in danger if a lone bodyguard was all that you offered these visitors.”

“Nonsense Captain, I should have thought that a single guard was more than enough, especially one as capable as you. In any case, most of the stories about the dangers of the Harbour District are wildly exaggerated.”

Arnor had been in no mood to accept the Commander's compliment, whether it was well meant or not and a hundred protests were on his lips. Before he could voice any of them, however, Valten interrupted.

“The lad's right Corwin; let him take some backup. After all, we wouldn't want to endanger the lives of our honoured guests.”

For a moment there had been a visible tension between the Commander and the Lord Marshal. Corwin had scowled at Valten, clearly not appreciating his sudden contribution but plainly frustrated that he could not, as his superior officer, simply be overruled. For his part, Valten had looked almost smug, an expression that Arnor was not used to seeing on the face of the Lord Marshal.

“Very well then,” Corwin had said, biting off each word as if it hurt him personally to say it, “You may take *one* guardsman with you. Please ensure that it is someone whom you trust. Once your charges arrive you must do the following...”

Corwin had then proceeded to give him further detailed instructions about where to take the ‘visitors’, instructions that had only served, if anything, to increase Arnor's misgivings about the whole enterprise.

“It looks like our ship's about to come in Captain.”

Dagmar's voice snapped Arnor's attention back to the present and he looked out over the waters beyond the pier. Although the night was clear and the moon full, all that he could make out across the water was a dark smudge against the horizon, which from this distance and in this light might have been a rock for all he knew. Given that

Dagmar had identified it as a craft, however, he had no doubt that that was exactly what it was.

As Arnor looked across at Dagmar he thought, not for the first time that night, how reassuring it was to have his sergeant there with him. Dagmar had been on the Watch for nigh on thirty years and, unlike Arnor, he was used to leading men. The sergeant had seen three other captains come and go before Arnor, and they, like him, had relied upon Dagmar as the solid rock upon which to bolster their own command. He could be wry sometimes, revealing little of his own emotions, but Arnor knew from personal experience that there was no man better to have beside you in a fight and he trusted Dagmar implicitly. That was why, presented by Commander Corwin with the opportunity to take with him just one other guardsman from all the men of the Watch that were available to him, he had chosen Dagmar.

“You know, sergeant, I believe you may be right.” Arnor said, as the outline of the ship that approached the wharf gradually became more distinct.

“Sir, are you sure about this? That’s no passenger ship – especially not one that anyone of importance would travel on,” said Dagmar.

Typically astute, the sergeant had once again locked onto Arnor’s concerns at that moment. From the short prow and narrow mast and sails, he could see that it was not a large craft, perhaps only a cutter or a rake rather than a galleon or a caravel, which were the normal means of passenger transport on the Winter Sea. The size of the craft puzzled him too: why were passengers that were so important to the Lord Marshal of Alvgard entering the city on a merchant ship?

Arnor had other misgivings that he had not shared with Dagmar but which concerned the nature of the ones that they were charged to escort. Corwin had informed him that not only were these visitors important in and of their own right, as Arnor had gathered from the fact that they were being provided with an armed retinue, but they were also valued guests of the Viceroy himself and their quarters were in the Capitol.

The Viceroy was not simply the governor of Alvgard in the way that other cities had mayors; he was also a member of the royal family and the King’s representative in the city. As such he was the supreme commander of all the city’s military personnel and his directives required absolute obedience. The Viceroy’s palace was in the Capitol, the smallest and oldest district of Alvgard, which had earned its name because it dated from a time when that part of the city had been the royal seat of the rulers of all Alfinheim. As well as being the site of the Viceroy’s palace the Capitol was otherwise dominated by various parliamentary and governmental buildings, and it was rare to find anyone other than noblemen or officials in that part of the city. Accommodation in the Capitol, whether temporary or permanent, was expensive beyond the means of commoners and those that could afford it were generally either to be envied or feared.

Arnor shook his head. One thing that did not make any sense was that, if these visitors were rich and important enough to be residing in the Capitol for the duration of their stay, they should surely have been able to afford their own protection without having to rely upon the City Watch. Given the nature of their arrival into Alvgard, by sea rather than road and under cover of darkness, Arnor was sure that they would have preferred that as few people as possible within the city knew of their presence. All of which meant only one thing – that having City Watch ‘bodyguards’ was not their idea. Someone, either the Lord Marshal or the Viceroy himself, wanted them watched, and for reasons other than simply ensuring their safety. To Arnor that was hardly a thought to inspire confidence.

He was forced to come out of his musings by the arrival of the ship at the quayside. As it drew up alongside the wharf Arnor noted that the ship was indeed, as he had suspected, a cutter, a hardy craft that was built for fishing in the turbulent coastal waters of the Winter Sea but was hardly suitable for the transport of noble born passengers. He had decided that aristocracy were the only ones that could command such attention from the Viceroy, although that still did nothing to explain the furtive manner of their arrival. Arnor's former misgivings came back with greater intensity and when he and Dagmar approached the cutter's dark bulk it was with great caution.

A single gangplank was laid out from the ship's starboard and down it came two privateers, sailors who had no allegiance to the Crown of Alfinheim but were instead in the pay of one of the Merchant Clans. They wore no uniforms; from their rude dress and manner Arnor judged them to be no more than deckhands and duly ignored them. He was waiting for their skipper and in due course he came out, although the only thing that marked him out as the vessel's captain was a cloak of office, for he was otherwise as plainly dressed as his men.

The captain saw Arnor and nodded at him. He was a merchant seaman rather than a member of the King's navy and therefore Arnor did not offer him a salute, as would have been appropriate in those circumstances. There were, however, other formalities to get out of the way before he could deal with the business at hand.

"Alvagarð greets you with a safe landfall, captain," he intoned formally.

"I, Nemenor, captain of the *Nightstar*, give thanks to Alvagarð for the gift of a safe landfall," the skipper replied, equally formally. He then gave Arnor an appraising look and his next words were somewhat less formal, "So you're the Captain of the Watch? I was expecting someone with more hair on his face."

Arnor tried not to be offended by Nemenor's bluntness. He could tell that the captain was a stranger to these shores, possibly a native of the islands in the Near East from his accent and his deep tan. As such the Northern speech was not his first tongue and phrases that might otherwise have appeared rude were probably better put down to his unfamiliarity with a strange language. In any case it was a response that Arnor, being an officer of the City Watch who had not yet passed his thirtieth year, was used to. Having only recently acquired the rank of Captain, Arnor realized that it was an experience that he would probably now have to go through more frequently than ever before. It was not a happy thought.

"You were expecting to be greeted by me then?" Arnor said, nodding in the affirmative but eager to change the subject.

Nemenor flashed him a wide grin, showing off a set of white teeth that contrasted sharply with the dark tones of his skin.

"Oh yes, Captain, my 'cargo' like to keep themselves well-informed."

Arnor frowned at the comment, not sure what to make of it. As far as he was aware the decision for him to accompany the Viceroy's guests had only been taken earlier that day and there was no possible way that word could have gotten to the cutter or its captain that he would be the one that greeted them when they landed. Yet Nemenor seemed to be implying that his *passengers* were aware that he would be there – how could that be? The skipper noticed his discomfiture straight away and reacted to it, his features assuming a look of seriousness in a heartbeat.

"Forgive me Captain, we Easterners are something of an acquired taste when it comes to our sense of humour. Please ignore what I said, nothing was meant by it."

For just a moment Arnor saw what could only have been described as a look of panic cross Nemenor's face. Whatever the man said, Arnor was sure that his previous

comment had not been entirely flippant. His sudden desire to take it back only made him even more suspicious. Before he could pursue the matter further, however, his attention was drawn by the appearance of what Nemenor had described as the *Nightstar's* 'cargo'.

Two figures appeared at the top of the gangplank, pausing to look around before they proceeded to walk down it. They moved slowly, seemingly content to take their time in going about their business. Arnor did not mind, as this gave him more of an opportunity to study them.

They were both covered from head to toe in heavy robes that were a deep purple in colour. Little of their features were visible as their cowls were pulled up, obscuring their eyes, and veils also served to obscure the lower half of their faces. Close-fitting gloves even hid their hands, although it was not a cold night. One of them walked with the aid of an ebony cane and from that, as well as his slower gait, Arnor deduced that he was the elder of the pair. Otherwise, hidden behind their travelling robes as they were, he might not have been able to tell them apart.

The pair's appearance did nothing to alleviate Arnor's growing concerns. He had an instinctive mistrust of any man who hid his face from the eyes of other men. What was it that they had to hide that they obscured themselves in such a way? But then, Arnor reasoned, perhaps this was simply their custom; after all they were from another land, and one that he knew little about.

Arnor had never travelled beyond the borders of his home country of Alfinheim, let alone left the shores of the island continent of Nordmar that it was a part of, and most of what he knew about the rest of the world was based on legends, rumours and tall tales told by travellers to those distant lands. Corwin had said that the *Nightstar* was inbound from Carne Caill, a realm on the continent of Westamar, which was located some way south west of Nordmar, beyond the Winter Sea. Conflict and mistrust marred the relations between the Westrians and the Nordmirians. His own people viewed the men of Westamar as godless and decadent, ruled by wicked sorcerers and venal politicians, while for their part the Westrians viewed the men of the north as nothing more than barbarians, primitive and savage. However much truth there was in the opposing viewpoints, and Arnor was not too proud to admit to himself that neither was completely without merit, the fact remained that the men of the west and those of the north rarely got on. This made the presence of these Carnishmen there and then, at the behest of the Viceroy no less, all the more inexplicable.

"They look like sorcerers to me, sir, be careful what you say to them," said Dagmar, his voice a whisper in Arnor's ear.

Arnor shook his head ruefully. For all of his sergeant's better qualities, Dagmar did suffer from one fatal flaw – his tendency to be superstitious. Such a trait was not uncommon in those from Dagmar's hometown of Lodur's Fall, which nestled in the shadows of the Icefinger Mountains and was a wild and rustic place. For his own part Arnor had no time for old wives' tales about sorcerers. He had never seen any evidence that what men called 'sorcery' was anything other than parlour tricks and cheap conjuration and until he did he had no intention of taking assumptions like the one that Dagmar had just made seriously.

He therefore ignored his sergeant and, as the elder Carnishman approached him, Arnor went to welcome the pair, his hand outstretched in greeting, as was the custom in the northlands. However, instead of taking it the cowed figure bowed deeply to him, a motion that was duly repeated by his companion. Caught off guard, Arnor coloured slightly when the other man did not take his hand. He quickly decided,

however, that no insult was meant and returned the strangers' elegant bows with a more awkward one of his own. This appeared to be their custom, after all, and, given that they had the favour of the Viceroy it would surely do no harm to humour them. Arnor turned around to make sure that Dagmar was following his lead and was satisfied to see that the sergeant was also bowing, although the forced smile on his face indicated that he was not particularly enjoying having to do so. Arnor shrugged at him, a gesture by way of which he tried to communicate that diplomacy sometimes required sacrifices. From the look that Dagmar returned him Arnor was not sure that the sergeant saw it that way.

Arnor's attention was arrested as the elder Carnishman lowered his cowl, revealing a face that was ancient and lined, as well as clean-shaven, which was unheard of for any man of his age who hailed from these parts. Strange curling tattoos that formed no recognisable pattern covered his face – another custom of Carne Caill – but his most startling feature was his eyes, which were cloudy and white. The old man was clearly blind and he moved his head from side to side as if trying to tell from which direction the sounds he was hearing came. Seeing this, Arnor felt the need to assist him and cleared his throat. Before he could say anything, however, the Carnishman's head spun around with a speed that was unnerving and his eyeless gaze fixed directly on Arnor.

“Captain Paul Arnor?”

“Yes,” said Arnor then, puzzled that the old man knew his name, he added, “But how...”

“The Viceroy managed to get us a message.” Another voice said.

It was the other Carnishman that had spoken although, as soon as she opened her mouth and removed her cowl, it became clear that it was in fact a woman of Carne Caill. In appearance she was very different from the women that he was used to – her hair and colouring were dark and her features were much more delicate than that of most Nordmirian woman, who tended to be tall and fair. In an odd way she reminded him of the First Minister of Alvagard, Gail Corenne, who was also said to have outlander blood in her veins, although the two women had few other outward similarities.

“May I introduce myself,” she said, “My name is Virulina and my companion is called Alimon Fez.”

Arnor noticed that Virulina did not elaborate on how the Viceroy had got a message to the pair while they were aboard a ship but did not press the issue, instead simply acknowledging their words of introduction with a formal nod. He also noticed that the strangers did not state their business or place of origin but realised that was probably not something that they would think to share with a lowly Watch Captain. He had no authority to insist that they give him such information in any case and, with the introduction done, he was about to ask that they follow him when another voice spoke.

“It looks like I arrived just in time.”

Arnor felt a spike of irritation, recognising the new voice even before he turned around. Two more horses appeared out of the night, their mail-clad riders bearing shields with a red swooping hawk emblazoned boldly upon them. The device was similar to that which was on Arnor's own shield, save that on theirs the hawk bore a sword in its talons – the symbol of the Alvagard Militia – while his carried an arrow – the symbol of the City Watch. He recognised the rider who had spoken straight away as Colonel Fenn, head of the militia, and, although he was not Arnor's direct superior he saluted him anyway in deference to his rank.

The City Watch and the Alvagard Militia represented the armed forces of the city, the former designed to combat the enemy within and the latter to battle to the enemy at the gates. Although they were both nominally under the command of the same man – Lord Marshal Valten – in practice they were run fairly independently by his lieutenants, Commander Corwin and Colonel Fenn. It was an open secret to everyone in Alvagard that the two men despised each other, and they constantly came into conflict despite the fact that, in theory at least, they had distinct roles and spheres of influence. In practice, however, they were constantly treading on each other's toes and unfortunately for Arnor and the other officers of both the Watch and the Militia, they were often caught in the crossfire on such occasions. Fenn had a special contempt, which he made little attempt to conceal, for Arnor; for he had been promoted to his position of Captain from the ranks while Fenn considered that all officers ought to be nobles like him.

Fenn acknowledged Arnor's salute with a perfunctory nod but gave no other sign that he was aware of his presence as he addressed himself to the two arrivals from Carne Caill.

"Greetings visitors to Alvagard, may the fires of my city warm you as well as those of your homes. I have come to take you to my lord, Viceroy Andros."

The strangers looked confused, both by Fenn's sudden arrival and by his words, which included a greeting commonly used in Nordmar but that was probably unknown in the sunnier climes of their homelands in the west. Arnor simply stared, struck speechless for a moment, for the Carnish were not the only ones who were confused by Fenn's presence.

"Colonel, I think that there must be some mistake," Arnor said finally, "I've been ordered to come here to escort the Viceroy's guests to the Capitol by the Lord Marshal personally."

"There is no mistake," Fenn said coldly, "My orders come directly from the Viceroy himself."

Arnor hesitated for a moment but his orders from his commanding officer had been very clear. Valten was not a man to be disobeyed and he could not do so simply on the hearsay of Colonel Fenn. Fenn was known for his ambition and for all that Arnor knew this might simply be one of his attempts to snatch glory for himself. It was almost unheard of for the Viceroy to give orders to the head of the Militia directly rather than via the Lord Marshal in any case. Making his decision Arnor steeled himself and took a step towards the Carnish, planting himself between them and Colonel Fenn.

"I'm sorry, sir, but I must insist that the visitors come with me."

At that point Fenn's companion also took a step forward.

"And I must insist that you get out of our way, *Captain*."

There was even greater disdain for Arnor on the Militiaman's face than there was on Fenn's, and his voice had dripped sarcasm as he had stated Arnor's rank, as if it was some sort of joke. Dagmar, who had been standing silently by Arnor's side till then, growled and placed a hand on the hilt of his sword.

"Show some respect Darfal or I'll teach you the meaning of the word the hard way."

Arnor finally recognised the man as Dagmar said his name – it was Kamen Darfal, another noble who was part of the army. He was Fenn's right hand man and had a reputation as a bully and a sadist. An ugly look crossed his face at Dagmar's words and his hand reached for his own sword. For a moment the tableau held, with

Arnor and his sergeant facing Fenn and his lieutenant, their weapons ready and the atmosphere taut with the promise of imminent violence.

In the end it was Alimon Fez who broke the tension, stepping forward to place himself between the men of the Watch and the Militia, his hands open in a placating gesture.

“Whilst I’m very grateful to you for granting my companion and I the inestimable honour of greeting us at the gates of your fair city personally, I must with the greatest of respect decline your kind offer of an escort. His Excellency the Viceroy indicated before we left Carne Caill that Captain Arnor would be the one to greet us and deliver us safely into his presence.”

Colonel Fenn could not hide his annoyance at the Carnishman’s words and at the same time Arnor fought to hide his surprise with, he hoped, greater success. He had never even visited the Western Continent, let alone met Alimon Fez or his companion, and he could not begin to understand how he was known to the man. Fenn asked the question that was on Arnor’s lips before he had a chance to do so.

“And may I ask why?”

Alimon Fez smiled.

“Because the name of Padraig Arnor is known and revered across Carne Caill. It was in honour of the father that we requested to meet the son.”

Arnor heaved a sigh – his father again. Would he ever escape the man’s legacy? He knew that his father had travelled far and wide in his fighting days and, although he had not known that he had gone as far a field as the distant Carnish islands, it did not surprise him. He turned to Fenn and his subordinate, hoping that this was the end of the matter.

“The outlander has expressed his wishes Colonel. I take it that your business here is done?”

It was a question but it was obvious from Fenn’s reaction that he also seemed to take it as a challenge. Arnor could tell from his frown and furrowed brow that he was mentally weighing up the loss of face involved in backing down against the trouble he would invite by angering the Carnishmen, the Lord Marshal and potentially the Viceroy. Arnor waited calmly as he knew that it was ultimately an easy choice to make – no soldier or watchman in Alvagard would ever risk attracting the Lord Marshal’s ire.

“It is done Captain.” Fenn said finally.

Darfal appeared about to protest but was waved down angrily by the Colonel, who leaned forward and spoke his next words in a whisper so that only Arnor would hear them.

“Watch your back Arnor. Your father isn’t around to protect you any more.”

Fenn and Darfal turned their horses as one before Arnor had a chance to react. It was probably just as well – he doubted whether he could have kept a check on his temper for much longer once they brought up his father. The mention of Padraig Arnor rarely brought out the best in his son.

Pausing a moment to collect himself Arnor turned to Alimon Fez and the girl Virulina, flashing them what he hoped was a reassuring smile.

“We’ve brought horses so mount up and follow me. We ride to the Viceroy’s palace before sunrise.”