

— SEAN POAGE —

THE
PRIZE

— < BONUS
BOOK > —

The Prize

A Bonus Short Story

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THE PRIZE

An opportunity to change one's life, one's destiny, is a rare thing. Gawain was determined not to squander this one. His back straight, jaw set, he tapped his mount's flanks, picking up the pace to merge into the steady stream of warriors gathering below the walls of the old Roman fort at the dyke's western end.

Cunbelin, son of the king, stood on the battlement, holding a white pennant aloft. He stared, frowning, at the grey, wizened scribe beside him. The old man shuffled his feet under the weight of those eyes, squinting into the hazy sun and holding a hand out in front of his face, twitching the top two fingers back and forth. Below them, in the narrowed space between the old fort and the marshy riverbanks, the host waited. More than two hundred horsemen stared up at the banner, silent, nervous, producing a reek of sweat and horse manure that rose to the prince's nostrils, causing his lips to tighten into a grimace.

Gawain calmed his nerves by looking around. As the horsemen gathered, Gawain had found himself pushed further into the middle than he had intended. It seemed as if every greybeard among the host surrounded him. On the walls above, local dignitaries and their families, anyone who could find space, crowded to peer breathlessly over the parapet. The less fortunate gathered farther back on the field behind their mounted warriors. A priest finally finished a long sermon about the mission of the Disciples, concluding with a short prayer for their safety before retreating to the fort as quickly as the churned mud would allow him. The warriors were glad to see him off. Their patience, though fortified by reverence, was wearing thin. It infected the horses, who stamped, snorted, and nipped at those around.

Finally, the clerk nodded and muttered something to the prince. Cunbelin's arm dropped as his eyes turned towards the horsemen below. A shout arose, and the mounted host surged forward towards the red glow of the early sun.

It was a mad scramble. Riders kicked, shoved and swatted each other with their reins as they tried to get out of the press and into clear road. The horses whumped into and bounced off each other, showing their displeasure with pinned ears and bared teeth. Gawain was frustrated by the logjam that kept him from working his way out of the crowd and onto the grassy verge.

"Let the young fools up front waste their mounts' breath in the first miles," Gwalhafed had said. "The prize goes to the wise, not the eager."

Following his brother's advice had spared Gawain the worst of the battering. The older riders around him were more experienced, but at least they were less likely to try to kick you out of your saddle.

His mare, Thistle, was as prickly as her name suggested, but quick and hardy. Gawain had a fondness for the troublesome horses among the family herd. He tried to guide her to the right, away from the road and the thickest of the crowd, but she fought him, chasing after another mare she deemed a rival. It was a struggle to rein her in. She had no way of knowing how far they had to go; that was Gawain's job. He must gauge the route and the distance and know when to let her have her head, and when to hold her back.

A leather strap slashed across Gawain's face, leaving a stinging welt. A rider pushed forward, cutting across Gawain's path.

"Move, boy!" the man snarled. "You're in the way of your betters!" He swatted at his horse's rump a couple of times, trying to drive it forward past another rider. Gawain refused to give ground and surged ahead, cutting him off.

The strap came again at Gawain's face, but this time, Gawain grabbed the strap and yanked it in close to his body, then pulled hard to his right and spurred Thistle into a gap in the press. The other rider had his hand through the thong's loop. Surprised and unable to let go, he was yanked from his saddle with a torrent

of curses. Gawain released the strap and glanced back to see the man curl into a ball to protect himself against the other riders thundering past.

Gawain grinned, pleased to deal the cad some justice and have one less competitor to boot. Thistle, irritated by the sudden turn and distraction from her quarry, jerked her head up and down. Gawain slowed her and found himself in a growing gap between the riders. It was difficult to hold Thistle back. She wanted to charge to the head of the mob and could sense that Gawain wanted to do the same. Nonetheless, Gawain had competed enough to know that those who worried about being in front early in the race would never be in the front at the end of the race.

Gawain was determined to be in front when this race finished. Three years had passed since he had earned his arms, yet not once had he ridden against the Picts, or had to defend his *Combrog*i against Scoti raiders. It was as if peace had chosen the year of his manhood to fall suddenly upon the land. There were no opportunities to win fame now, except in the inferior glory of the games.

Gawain competed often and performed well. But this year, the king had declared a race along the Giant's Dyke, almost forty miles from the western end to the eastern. The champion would be honoured with a seat at the king's table for the feast of Pentecost. Gawain had never been to the mighty fortress on the Rock of the Clut. This would be his time, his prize.

After half a mile, they passed beyond sight of the old fort and the race became markedly different. Most slowed, except for a few fools who pushed their steeds onwards in an attempt to get into the lead. Gawain brought Thistle to an easy pace that she could maintain for hours. With occasional rests and watering, she would be well prepared for the final sprint.

This race was about more than getting to the finish the quickest. It was a test of stamina and speed, of course, but also a test of a rider's judgement and skill. After the race, the champion must return to Alt Clut within two days, on the same horse. Driving

one's steed to an early death for the glory of a win would not profit the rider at all.

Gawain scanned the route ahead. Most of the riders had steered to the softer ground on the left or right of the old road that followed the dyke. The field had opened, leaving more space between riders as some fell back from the madness of the start.

"Don't be lulled by the long, easy pace," Gwalhafed had stressed. "Keep your eyes on the riders ahead and let them find the difficult terrain for you."

Even in a race, long hours of riding were often boring, and riders might daydream rather than stay alert. As they continued eastward, settlements became fewer, and before long, there would not even be locals to watch them pass. They were not required to follow the road along the dyke, but deviating far from it was a good way to become lost, or stumble into treacherous terrain. Gawain was very familiar with this particular region and knew where it was best to steer away from the old fortification.

Some claimed the steep embankment was a giant's heel mark, daring another giant to cross. However, Gawain's father had told him it was a wall built centuries ago by the Romans to bottle up the Picts in the north. In some places, the turf had eroded away, and the stone foundations showed. All along the ditch, spaced every couple of miles or so, were the remains of small forts. Only the foundations remained for most, but some had been repaired for garrison use. Others were repurposed as animal pens and homesteads for farmers willing to brave the threat of the Picts on this windy frontier.

Gawain judged that he had been riding for less than two hours. Early on, he had begun to move steadily past other riders who had pushed their mounts too hard. He saw only a few riders ahead of him now, but more were probably farther on. Glancing over his shoulder, he saw several behind, but not as many as he had expected. He was dismayed.

"Am I too cautious, Thistle?" he asked, patting her on the neck. She responded with a twitch of the ears and a tug at her bit.

Gawain was approaching the edge of familiar territory. It would be a good idea to give Thistle a drink and a bit of rest. A copse ahead hid a brook that would do. He could not be sure where the next water source would be.

He found an opening in the thickets around the spring and entered, dismounting in the shade to lead Thistle in. At the water's edge, he unsaddled her and let her drink, pouring the cool water over her back and neck with a leather bag he carried. Then he began checking her over for signs of injury or strain. Finished drinking, she stepped right into the stream and began tearing at tufts of grass along the edge.

"Hold still, you bothersome old heifer," Gawain grumbled, trying to examine her hooves. Thistle snorted and turned, bumping Gawain right onto his backside in the water.

"Who's riding whom in this race?" a voice called out.

Gawain looked up to see another rider approaching and gritted his teeth as he stood up. It was Hueil, the son of Caw. Their family's lands bordered Gawain's family lands, and they were not good neighbours.

"You couldn't see, Hueil?" Gawain asked, taking up Thistle's hoof again. "You've been following me the entire way. You should probably keep following me, so you don't get lost."

"Do I know you?" Hueil frowned. "Oh, yes, you're Gwyar's boy. The one who knows more about dice and wandering than work. Does your father know you're away from his farm?" He dismounted and walked his horse down to the water's edge. Thistle, perceiving Gawain's tension, pinned her ears and snapped at Hueil's horse. "You should mind your beast," Hueil growled.

"She's a good judge of character," Gawain retorted. There were too many insults in Hueil's previous statement for Gawain to remain civil. If one of them did not leave, it would turn into a brawl. He threw the saddle and tack over his shoulder and led Thistle across the stream and on through the wood, back towards the road. "I'll see you at the finish."

"I'll be waiting for you."

Thistle had cooled down after her drink and a short walk, so Gawain saddled her, and they set off again at a light trot. Riders streamed along the road or through the fields below it, often in small clumps of friends and clan-groups. Gawain was the only entrant from his clan. His father had readily granted his request to join the race. He seldom refused such requests and took pride in Gawain's achievements in games and on the hunt. But as the younger son of the chief, Gawain's responsibilities were light. It nagged at the back of Gawain's mind that he should take a more active role in family responsibilities, rather than filling his time with recreation, and he knew others whispered the same.

His brother was a renowned warrior, still respected despite the loss of his leg. Gawain felt eclipsed in Gwalhafed's shadow, frustrated with the injustice of a world that had left him without a chance to prove himself as a warrior. Gawain needed a change. He did not want to be a disappointment to his father.

"Almighty God, thy will, not mine," Gawain bowed his head as he rode. "But I pray this day will change my life for the better, and I vow to be a better son."

The miles swept by beneath the staccato beat of Thistle's hooves. Even with regular stops for water, Gawain could see that he was leaving the other riders behind. He was also pleased that he had not seen Hueil in some time.

The sun was approaching its zenith, nearly six hours since the race began. To the north of the dyke, lowland farms began to appear. The dyke itself perched on the northern edge of rising ground with pastures and woodlands behind it.

"When you cross a strong river and see the sea to the north, you're about four miles from the end," his father had told him. "The last half mile will bring you to a village. Just past it, the wall ends at an old fort."

Seabirds squawked and wheeled as Gawain crossed the bridge over the river. Less than a dozen riders appeared to remain ahead-- a few more than he had hoped to see at this point. He gave Thistle a tap of his spurs and, sensing Gawain's rising excitement, she

responded with enthusiasm. She would have jumped into a sprint if Gawain had not held her back. It was not yet time.

He gradually gained on them. Those he passed cursed and tried to pick up their own pace, but Gawain could see that their mounts were nearing their limits. They would not make the final dash. Gawain smiled as he moved into third place, then frowned when he recognised the rider in the lead. It was Hueil.

The first hovels of the village appeared in the distance. Groups of people were running towards the road to see the contest. Gawain caught up with the second rider, a scraggy old fellow wearing only a loincloth, and began passing him. The man glanced at Gawain, grinning, and nodded. Gawain smiled and nodded in return as he passed, his eyes going back to Hueil, a spear-throw ahead. Hueil looked back to see Gawain and the loincloth rider gaining on him, and turned his attention back to the village, lashing his mount onward to the narrowing gap ahead.

This was the time to put everything into the final sprint. Thistle was working hard, but far from spent. Hueil's horse was at its limits, sides heaving, frothing at the mouth and around the tack.

Gawain caught up to Hueil as they entered the village. The man scowled as Gawain passed, lashing his beast, who began stumbling, slowing. A fading string of curses told Gawain that Hueil had pushed his steed too hard, too soon and was out of the race. But as he turned his head to look back, he saw that Loincloth was not far behind him, grinning like a madman.

They flashed through the central square, people crowding around the edges, cheering. Many ran towards the other side of the town and the finish line, narrowing the path even more. But the end was in sight. Beyond the last building, an open space extended to an old stone fort where a cluster of men waited with a saffron banner.

"Come on, girl," Gawain urged, slacking the reins and tapping her sides. "We're almost there!"

Thistle's head stretched out as she unleashed everything she had and pulled out well ahead of the other rider. Nearing the end of the village, Gawain saw his goal ahead and laughed with joy.

His eyes swept the cheering crowd along the road and fell upon a lovely face framed by auburn curls, eyes wide and mouth agape with excitement.

It was only a glance. It seemed like much longer. And it was enough to pull Gawain's eyes from his path for the second that it took for a child to pop out from around the corner and spook Thistle. Thistle snorted and started, nearly stumbling in her sudden shift to the right. Distracted, Gawain was unprepared and flipped forward, making a desperate grab for Thistle's sweating neck. He slipped off and flew to the ground, tumbling along until he lay flat on his back in a daze and cloud of dust. Thistle and the other contestant thundered on without him.

"That damned horse is going to win the race without me," Gawain thought as he lay, coughing and gasping. He sensed a few people gathering around him, while most ran past.

"Are you hurt?" a girl exclaimed.

Gawain opened his eyes to see a bright halo of the afternoon sun around a head hovering over him. His eyes focused and he saw the girl who had caught his attention, concern in her expression, as she touched his forehead.

"What's your name?" Gawain murmured.

"My name?" she said, taken aback. After a moment, she smiled and tilted her head. "Rhian."

A snort and whicker announced Thistle's return as her head appeared over them both, a bit of froth dropping onto Gawain's forehead. Gawain grimaced, smearing it away, but did not scold her. His thoughts were on a different future than the one he had imagined earlier.

"A pleasure to meet you, Rhian."



MEET SEAN POAGE

As a lifelong explorer, sleuth and amateur historian, Sean Poage has travelled the world and worked in a variety of occupations, including soldier, police officer and computer geek. His curiosity about beginnings, journeys and what motivates people drew him to prehistoric linguistics, Neolithic Britain, the ancient Sumerians, Mycenaean Greece and the enigmatic world of the “Dark Ages” in Europe.

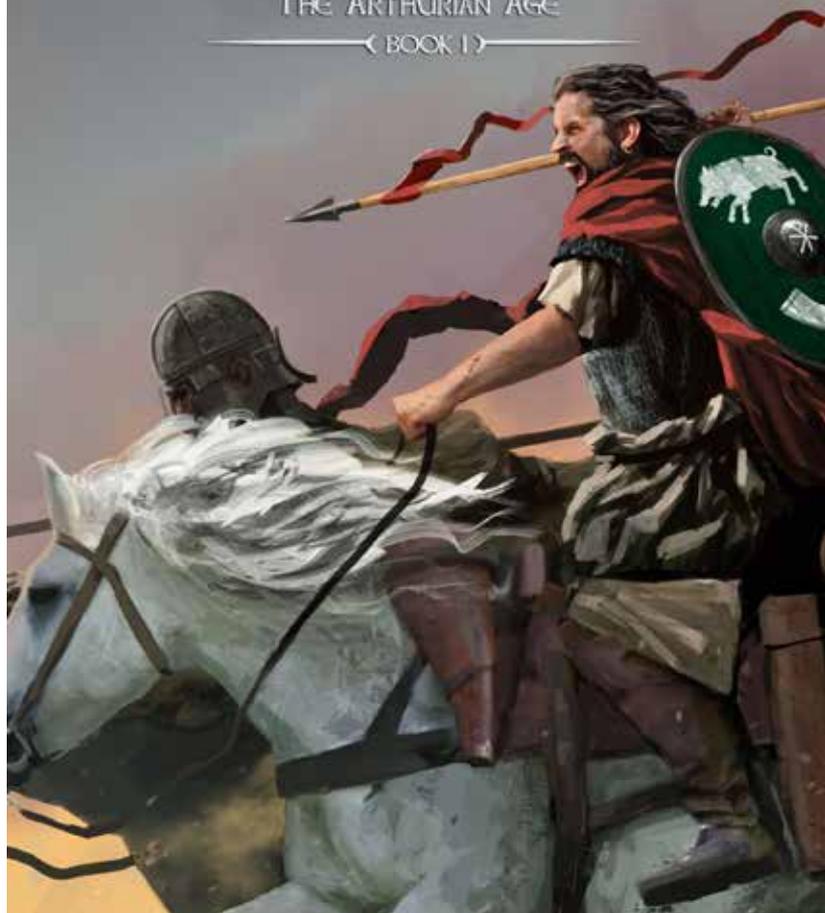
Discovering that the ancient origins of “King Arthur” and his knights were far more interesting than the well-known stories written centuries later, Sean’s research took him deep into the history and legends of the Arthurian Age. What began as a mental exercise examining one promising theory resulted in his ground-breaking novel, *The Retreat to Avalon*. The second book in the series, *The Strife of Camlan*, will carry on from the events of the first book, while the final book, *The Three Terrible Revelations*, will take us back to the beginning of the Arthurian Age and answers the remaining mysterious questions.

Sean is a graduate with a Bachelor of Science in Computer Networking from Regis University in Denver, Colorado. When he isn’t writing, Sean works as an IT manager and enjoys spending time with his wife, Jennifer, and their blended family of four children, a cat and a dog in Maine, USA.

— SEAN POAGE —
THE RETREAT
TO AVALON

THE ARTHURIAN AGE

◀ BOOK 1 ▶



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Thank you in advance.