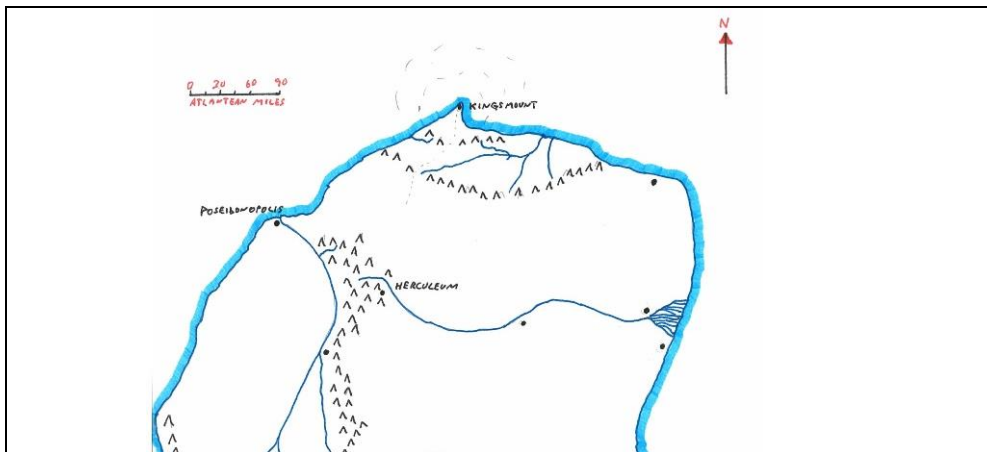


The Last Days of Atlantis

By David Meadows & Friends

One: The Caravan



The enemy came from the south, from beyond even distant Necropolis, from the wastelands where no cities should be, from lands where few men lived, from lands where it should not be possible to raise an army. And yet the army came, and at its head a General, a woman, more terrible than any Atlantis had ever known. Her name was only whispered: the Demon Queen. Slowly the blight crept across the face of the continent, and city by city fell before it, and with each new battle, with each new conquest, the army seemed to swell, not diminish. With the fall of the mountain stronghold of Herculeum, only Poseidonopolis and Kingsmount remained as havens for free Atlanteans. And when news came that the army was advancing on Poseidonopolis, people fled further north, fled to the city at the far northern extremity of Atlantis, the city of Kingsmount. In their thousands they came, in small groups or in large caravans, making the days-long journey by horse or wagon when they could, by foot when they had to. All fleeing to the city which some said was the oldest in Atlantis but was now a forgotten backwater with quaint, un-Atlantean ways. And soon, the city of Kingsmount would stage the final scenes in the history of this, the greatest land in all the history of the Earth.

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The caravan had been travelling for days, wending its way along the Great North Road from Poseidonopolis to Kingsmount. On the route, the numbers had swollen by men and women leaving their farms and villages with whatever they could carry, refugees fleeing the coming enemy and hoping to find safety in the city. By the time it approached the Kingsmount promontory, the caravan numbered two dozen wagons drawn by a variety of beasts, and almost five hundred people travelling on foot.

The final wagon in the caravan, an open, horse-drawn cart, belonged to Clagg, a merchant of Kingsmount. With him came a small knot of armed men who by unspoken consent appeared to be acting as a rear-guard to the caravan, though no pursuing enemy was in sight. Their names were Falderstaff Quagmire, a rough-looking rogue who leaned on a stout quarterstaff, Fourth, who described himself as a peaceful alchemist and yet carried a sabre, Gotye Konig, a fighting man with a huge two-handed sword, who led a fine warhorse, and Anenomes, a priest of Poseidon.

Daylight faded as the caravan reached the narrow promontory that had Kingsmount as its northern tip. At the front of the caravan, the leaders conferred, and halted the wagons. At the speed of the slowest wagons it might take two more hours to reach the city walls, with no guarantee that the gates would be opened after dark. It was deemed prudent to camp here in the open and continue in the morning.

The column halted in ramshackle fashion, wagons stopping where they were and people spreading out on either side, erecting shelters where they had them or bedding down in the open where they had none. Clagg took an iron cooking pot from his cart, while Fourth started a fire and Falderstaff produced a pair of rabbits he had snared that morning. From the rear of the caravan, they could only clearly see the people camping next to the penultimate wagon, though there were lights and fires springing to life along the length of the column.

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The bandits came from the east, striking out of the darkness. Five men, armed with swords and bows. Arrows thudded into the sides of the penultimate wagon, mercifully missing any of the refugee family camped beside it, and the screams of the woman and children alerted the entire column.

At Clagg's wagon, Falderstaff, Gotye and Anenomes seized their weapon and ran forward to assist. Fourth hung back, preparing his bow.

The fight was short and confused. Beyond the light of their camp fire, it was difficult to see clearly. The three defenders engaged the bandits at random, with no cohesive plan or thought of teamwork. Fourth, hoping to pick off bandits with his bow, soon found that they could see him more clearly than he could see them. As arrows struck close to where he was standing, he prudently moved behind the wagon, where Clagg was already cowering.

Despite the odds against them, the superior skills and determination of Falderstaff, Anenomes and Gotye won the day. Three attackers were soon lying dead or dying, while the other two ran blindly into the darkness. When other armed men from the wagons came running to help, the battle was already over.

While they recovered their breath and congratulated themselves on a successful fight, they heard shouts of distress from the front of the column of wagons. With growing dread, they realised that the fight at the rear had been a mere diversion. The true target of the bandits' attack had been the richer wagons at the head of the column.

Falderstaff, Anenomes, Gotye and Fourth ran to the lead wagon. They were too late to intervene. A hysterical serving woman was explaining to the gathered crowd of refugees that her mistress, a lady of some importance, had been snatched from her covered wagon and carried off into the night.

Falderstaff soon found the tracks of several men moving back towards the east. That way lay only the cliffs at the edge of the promontory, and then the sea. Perhaps the kidnappers were retreating by boat, in which case pursuit would be impossible. If they were to be followed, it must be by a small, fast group who would set off immediately.

There was hurried discussion. It was agreed that Gotye would ride to the gates of Kingsmount and alert the city, bringing men back to help guard the caravan against further attack through the night. Falderstaff, Anenomes, and Fourth alone would pursue the fleeing kidnappers, taking only their weapons and a lantern by which to see their tracks.

It took only a few minutes for the three men to reach the cliffs at the east. The Moon had now risen, a thin crescent that gave them just enough light to mark the cliff edge. Dozens of feet below, waves crashed on rocks. There was no sign of the bandits. Debating whether they might have turned north, to the city, or south to escape on the plains, the three men cast around on the ground for further tracks.

Falderstaff found the way, again. Hidden behind gorse bushes that lined the cliff at this point, he discovered a cut in the cliff that seemed to offer a treacherously steep descent to a ledge some distance below. The marks of booted feet at the top of the chalky slope were clear.

Whispering a warning to his fellows, Falderstaff moved forward cautiously, tested the footing on the slope, and slid rapidly out of sight.

Second later, his voice floated up to them.

‘There is a ledge, and a cave.’

The other two scrambled down to join him.

To be continued in Chapter Two: The Tunnel