

# One

The first drops of rain began to fall, as hard as hammers and as cold as steel against my cheek. My mail hung heavily upon my shoulders, and my back and arse were aching. We had risen at first light and had spent much of the day in the saddle, and now night lay once more like a blanket across the wooded hills.

Our mounts' hooves made hardly a sound against the damp earth as we pressed on up the slope. The path we followed was narrow, little more than a deer track, and so we rode in single file with the trees close on either side. Leafless branches brushed against my arm; some I had to fend away from my face. Above, the slender crescent of the moon struggled to make itself shown, casting its cold light down upon us. The clouds were rolling in and the rain began to come down more heavily, pattering upon the ground. I pulled the hood of my cloak up over my head.

There were five of us that night: all of us men who had served our lord for several years, oath-sworn and loyal knights of his own household. These were men I knew well, alongside whom I had fought more times than I cared to remember. These were men who had been there in the great battle at Hæstinges, and who had survived.

And I was the one who led them. I, Tancred a Dinant.

It was the twenty-eighth day of the month of January, in the one thousand and sixty-ninth year since our Lord's Incarnation. And this was the third winter to have passed since the invasion: since we had first mustered on the other side of the Narrow Sea, boarded ships and made the crossing on the autumn tide. The third winter since Duke Guillaume had led our army to victory over the oath-breaker

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and usurper, Harold son of Godwine, at Hæstinges, and was received into Westmynstre church and crowned as rightful king of the English.

And now we were at Dunholm, and further north than any of us had been before: in Northumbria, of all the provinces of the kingdom of England the only one which after two years and more still refused to submit.

I glanced back over my shoulder, making sure that none were lagging behind, casting my gaze over each one of them in turn. In my tracks rode Fulcher fitz Jean, heavy-set and broad of shoulder. Following him was Ivo de Sartilly, a man as quick with his tongue as he was with his sword, then Gérard de Tillières, reticent yet always reliable. And bringing up the very end of the line, almost lost in the shadow of the night, the tall and rangy figure of Eudo de Ryes, whom I had known longer and trusted more than any other in Lord Robert's household.

Beneath their cloaks their shoulders hung low. They all held lances, but rather than pointing to the sky as they should have been, ready to couch under the arm for the charge, they were turned down towards the ground. None of them, I knew, wanted to be out on such a night. Each would rather have been indoors by the blazing hearth-fire with his pitcher of ale or wine, or down in the town with the rest of the army, joining in the plunder. As too would I.

'Tancred?' Eudo called.

I turned my mount slowly around to face him, bringing the rest of the knights to a halt. 'What is it?' I asked.

'We've been searching since nightfall and seen no one. How long are we to stay out?'

'Until our balls freeze,' Fulcher muttered behind me.

I ignored him. 'Until daybreak if we have to,' I replied.

'They won't come,' Eudo said. 'The Northumbrians are cowards. They haven't fought us yet and they won't fight us now.'

They had not; that much at least was true. Word of our advance had clearly gone before us, for everywhere we had marched north of Eoferwic we had seen villages and farms deserted, people fleeing

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with their livestock, driving them up into the hills and the woods. When finally we reached Dunholm and passed through its gates just before sunset earlier that night, we had found the town all but empty. Only the bishop of the town and his staff had been left, guarding the relics of their saint, Cuthbert, who resided in the church. The townsmen, they said, had fled into the woods.

And yet there was something about the ease of our victory that had made Lord Robert uncertain, and that was why he had sent the five of us, as he had sent others, to search for any sign of the enemy nearby.

‘We keep looking,’ I said firmly. ‘Whether or not our balls freeze.’

In truth I didn’t think we would find anyone tonight, for these were people who would never before have seen a Norman army. Naturally they would have heard of how we had crushed the usurper at Hæstinges, but they could not have witnessed it themselves. They had not felt the might of the mounted charge which had won us that battle and so many others since. But now at last we had come in force: a host of two thousand men come to claim what was the king’s by right. They would have seen our banners, our horses, our mail glinting in the low winter sun, and they would have known that there was no hope of standing against us. And so they had fled, leaving us the town.

So it seemed to me, at least. But what I thought didn’t matter, for the decision was not mine to make. Rather it belonged to our lord, Robert de Commines, by the king’s edict the new Earl of Northumbria, and the man charged with subduing this quarrelsome province. Of course Eudo and the others knew this, but they were tired and all they wanted was to rest. We had been on the road so long: it was nearly two weeks since we had left Lundene. Two weeks which we had spent riding and marching through rain and sleet and snow, over unfamiliar country, across marshes and hills that seemed to go on without end.

We carried on up the slope until we had come to its brow and could look down upon the land in every direction: upon the wooded hills to the north and the open fields to the south. The moon was partly hidden behind a cloud and I could see almost nothing but

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the rise and fall of the earth. Certainly there was no hint of fire-light or spearpoints, or anything else that would have betrayed the enemy. The wind buffeted at my cheeks and the rain continued to fall, though far to the north and east, near to where the land met the German Sea, I saw clear skies glittering with stars and I hoped that the weather would soon ease.

I checked Rollo, my horse, and swung down from the saddle, patting him on the neck.

'We'll rest here awhile,' I said. I thrust the end of my lance into the sodden ground, leaving the head to point towards the sky, while beneath it the damp pennon limply displayed the hawk that was Lord Robert's device. I lifted my shield from where it hung by its long guige strap across my back, and rested it against the trunk of a tree. It bore the same emblem: a black symbol upon a white field; the bird in flight with talons extended, as if descending for the kill.

There was not much forage to be had here, and so I dug a brace of carrots out from my saddlebag to give to Rollo. He had kept going without complaint all day, and I would have liked to have offered him more, but for now it was all I had.

The others said nothing as they too dismounted and began to pace about, feeling the use of their legs once more. Eudo rubbed at the lower part of his back, doubtless nursing some twinge from spending so long in the saddle.

To the east the clouds were beginning to break, and I could spy the silver-flecked ribbon of the river Wiire as it wove about the town of Dunholm. A narrow promontory jutted out to the south, atop which stood the fastness: a palisade surrounding a small huddle of buildings; shadows against the half-lit clouds. The promontory was sided by steep bluffs and the river coiled about them, enclosing the fastness on three sides. Thin spires of smoke rose gently from the thatch of the mead-hall there: threads of white lit by the moon.

Below the fastness lay the town. There the rest of our army would be out in the streets: half a thousand knights like ourselves, the household warriors of the lords heading this expedition; seven hundred spearmen; and another three hundred archers. And of course there were the scores upon scores of others who attended

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on such an army: armourers, swordsmiths, leech-doctors and others. Many of those would be there too: close to two thousand men revelling in the spoils of war, the capture of Dunholm, the conquest of Northumbria.

It was perhaps something of a risk to allow those men to go plundering when there was a chance that the enemy still lurked, but the truth was that they had been waiting the whole march for the promise of booty. It mattered less for knights like ourselves, for we were paid well enough by our lord, but the spearmen fought out of obligation: most were drawn from the fields of their lords' estates and so this was their only hope of reward. For Robert to deny them it now would be to turn them against him, and that he could not afford to do. Already there was discontent amongst the other nobles, some of whom were reckoned to have felt (though none had said openly) that they were more deserving and that the honour of the earldom should have gone to them, to a Norman rather than a Fleming, as Robert was. But many were the men who had come over in the last two years who were Normans only by allegiance, rather than by birth. I myself hailed from the town of Dinant in Brittany, though it was some years since I was last there; Fulcher was Burgundian, while others came from Anjou or even Aquitaine. But in England that should not have mattered, for in England we were all Frenchmen, bound together by oaths and by a common tongue.

Besides, Lord Robert was one of the men closest to King Guillaume, having served him for more than ten years, since the battle at Varaville. I found it odd to say the least that a man who had served loyally and for so long should be resented so vehemently. On the other hand these times were not as settled as once they had been, and there were many, I knew, who would look only for their own advancement rather than the good of the realm.

'It was on a night like this that we took Mayenne five years ago,' Gérard said suddenly. 'Do you remember?'

I had fought in so many battles that most of them had blurred in my memory, but I recalled that campaign. It had been a protracted one, extending late into the autumn, perhaps even into the early part of the winter. I knew because I could picture the sacks of

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newly harvested grain we had captured on our raids, and I could see the leaves turning brown and falling from the trees in the countryside all about. Yet, strangely, of the battle for the town itself no images came to mind.

'I remember,' Eudo said. 'It was in November; the last town to fall on that campaign. The rebels had retreated and were holding out within its walls.'

'That's right,' said Gérard. 'They expected a long siege, but Duke Guillaume knew they were well supplied.' He took a bite from his loaf, then wiped a grimy sleeve across his mouth. 'We on the other hand had over four thousand mouths to feed, but it was nearing winter and the countryside lay barren—'

'And so we had no choice but to attack,' Eudo said. A smile broke out across his thin face. 'Yes, I remember. We attacked that night, so quickly that we had overrun the town even before their lord had dressed for battle.' He laughed and looked up at the rest of us.

I shook my head; five years was a long time. Back then I would have been but twenty summers old and, like all youths, my head was probably full of ideas of glory and plunder. I had craved the kill; not once had I paused to consider the details of who we fought or why, only that it had to be done.

Beside me, Fulcher yawned and shrugged his shoulders inside his cloak. 'What I'd give to be with my woman right now.'

'I thought you left her back in Lundene,' I said.

'That's what I mean,' he replied. He took a draught from his waterskin. 'I say let the Northumbrians keep their worthless corner of the country. There's nothing in this land but hills and trees and sheep.' He gave a laugh, but it seemed to me that there was little humour in it. 'And rain.'

'It's King Guillaume's by right,' I reminded him. 'And Lord Robert's, too, now that he's been made earl.'

'Which means we'll never be rid of the place.'

'You'll see your woman soon enough,' I said, growing tired of these complaints.

'That's easy enough to say, when your Oswynn is waiting for you back in Dunholm,' Ivo put in.

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'If there isn't another man taking care of her instead,' Eudo added, smirking.

Had I been more awake I might have been able to think of some retort, but instead I simply glared at him. I was not young or foolish enough to think that I loved Oswynn, or that she loved me; she was English and knew hardly a word of French or Breton, and I was French and knew almost none of English. But she was my woman all the same and I prayed to God that she was safe. Perhaps Eudo had been speaking in jest, but on a night such as this, when wine and mead flowed freely, I knew how high men's spirits could run, how hard it was for them to control their lusts. There were few enough women to be had as it was: only those who had come northwards with the army. Soldiers' wives and camp-followers. Women like Oswynn.

There was a kind of wild beauty in the way she always wore her hair unbound, in the way her eyes appeared dark and yet inviting, that drew the stares of men wherever we went. More than once before, it had been only the threat of my blade meeting their necks that had kept them away. I did not like to leave her on her own, and for that reason I had paid Ernst and Mauger, another two of the men from my conroi, to stay away from the plunder and to keep guard over the house I had taken for us. Both were fearsome fighters, men who had been at my side at Hæstinges, and there were few, I was sure, who would try to defy them. But even so, I would be glad when the morning came, when I could get back to her.

I swallowed my last mouthful of bread, laced up my saddlebag and looped the shield-strap back over my head. 'Mount up,' I said to the rest of them as I climbed up on to Rollo's back and freed the haft of my lance from the earth. 'We move on.'

The track continued to the west. There had been high winds recently and on several occasions we had to negotiate around trees that had fallen across the way. More than once the path itself seemed to disappear and we had to turn back until we found it again. To venture into the heart of the woods in the dark was to risk getting lost, for we did not know this country.

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But the enemy would. They would know to stay away from the paths; they would probably travel in small groups rather than together. They could be less than a hundred paces from us and still we might pass them by.

I felt an angry heat rise up inside me. Our presence out in these woods was as much use as a cart without wheels: Robert had sent us out only so the other lords might see that he was being vigilant. And yet if we returned before dawn without having seen anything of the enemy, then we would have defied his orders and failed in our duty to him.

I gritted my teeth and we rode on in silence. I had been with Robert since my fourteenth year, when he was little older than I was now, and in that time I had come to know him as a generous lord, who afforded his men good treatment and rewarded them well, too, often with gifts of silver or arms or even horses. Indeed it was from him that I had received Rollo, the destrier I rode: a strong mount of constant temper who had seen me through several campaigns and many battles. To his longest-serving and most loyal retainers, moreover, Lord Robert gave land, and I, as one of the men who had led his conrois into battle, as someone who had saved his life on more than one occasion, would soon be one of those. I was patient, as one had to be, and grateful for what he had given me, and rarely in those years had I found cause to resent him. But now, as I imagined him with the rest of the lords, sitting by the hearth in the mead-hall up in the fastness, while we were here—

I was broken from my thoughts by the sound of church bells ringing out from the east.

‘What’s that?’ Eudo said.

There was no pattern to it, no rhythm, just a clash of different notes. It came from across the river, from the direction of the town, and I frowned, for my first thought was that some drunken men had taken to violating the church. And then, as suddenly as it had begun, it stopped.

I pulled on the reins and Rollo slowed to a halt. He whickered, his breath misting in the frigid air. The night was quiet and all I could hear was the soft patter of raindrops upon the earth, and the

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branches whistling and creaking as the wind began to gust. But then the chiming came again: a long, dull tolling that seemed to resound off the distant hills.

Sickness clawed at my stomach. I had heard bells like those before.

'We have to get back to the town,' I said. I turned my mount about, and then, because I was not sure whether the rest had heard me, shouted: 'We have to get back!'

I dug my heels into Rollo's flanks. He reared up; I leant forwards as he came back to earth and we took off up the hill, back along the way we had come. Hooves pounded; the ground thundered. I spurred him on, faster, not looking behind to see if the others were following. The rain lashed down harder, driving through my mail, plastering my tunic and braies against my skin. Trees flashed past on either side and still I looked to the east, towards the river, trying to see beyond them to the promontory and to Dunholm, but through the mass of trunks and branches I could see nothing.

A war-horn sounded out across the hills: two sharp blasts that pierced the night air. A signal to rally.

Suddenly the ground fell away and I was racing down the hill towards the river. I neared the edge of the trees; the three stone arches of the bridge came into sight. The wind tugged at my cloak as it swept down from the north, and carried on that wind came a faintly rippling beat: the sound made when a hundred spear-hafts drummed against a hundred shield-rims. A sound I knew only too well. It was one I had first heard at Hæstinges, when I had stood at the bottom of the hill and gazed up at all those thousands of Englishmen lined with their shields and their weapons along its crest, each one ready for us to charge up towards them, each one taunting us to come and die on their blades.

It was the sound of the battle-thunder, meant to intimidate, and even after all my years of fighting it still did. My heart thumped in time with the beat.

For Lord Robert had been right, and the Northumbrians had come.