

# One

They came at first light, when the eastern skies were still grey and before anyone on the manor had risen. Shadows lay across the land: across the hall upon the mound and the fields surrounding it, across the river and the woods and the great dyke beyond that runs from sea to sea. And it was from those shadows that they came upon Earnford, with swords and knives and axes: a band of men perhaps as few as a dozen in number, perhaps as many as thirty. In truth no one knew, for by the time enough of us had woken, armed ourselves and gathered to stand against them, they had already turned and fled, slipping away amidst the trees, taking seven girls and women from the village with them.

It was the third such raid the Welsh had made in the last month, and the first that had met with any success. Always before now a cry had been raised and we had managed to gather in time to ward them off. For despite their barbarous ways, they were a cowardly race, and it was rare that they chose to fight unless they were sure they had weight of numbers behind them. Every night I'd made sure to place a man on watch, except that this time the sentry must have fallen asleep, for there had been no warning until the screams had begun.

Behind them they left three men slain together with their livestock, and a cluster of smoking ruins where houses had once stood. And so as the skies lightened over the manor of Earnford, my new-found home, it was to me, Tancred a Dinant, that the villagers turned. They wanted justice; they wanted vengeance; but most of all they wished to see their womenfolk returned safely to them. As their lord I had a duty to their protection, and so I called my knights

to me – my faithful followers, my sworn swords – together with as many men as would join me from the village. We buckled our scabbards and knife-sheaths to our belts, donned helmets and mail and jerkins of leather, and those of us who had horses readied them to ride out. Thus with the first glimmer of sun breaking over the hills to the east, we set off in pursuit of the men who had done this.

But now the shadows were lengthening once more; soon it would be evening and we were no closer to finding them or the women they had taken. We had tracked them across winding valleys, through woods so thick with undergrowth that it was often hard to make out their trail, and we were many miles into their country. I no longer recognised the shape of the hills or the curve of the river, and nor, I was sure, would those men of the village who had come with me, most of whom had probably never ventured this far from home in all their lives.

‘They’re gone,’ muttered Serlo, who was riding beside me. ‘It’ll be dark before long, and we’ll never find them then.’

He was the most steadfast of my household knights, one of the three who lived on my manor: built like a bear, and possessed of stout arms and a fierce temper. He was not quick, either in movement or in wits, but there were few who could match his strength and so he was a good man to have at one’s side in battle.

I shot him a look, aware of the others following close behind: the dozen men and boys who were depending on us, whose wives’ and sisters’ honour, not to mention their lives, would be forfeit if we failed.

‘We’ll find them,’ I replied. ‘We haven’t chased these sons of whores all day just to give up now.’

I tried to sound confident, though I had my doubts. We hadn’t stopped since first we set out, but instead had ridden and marched throughout the day, the hottest so far this summer. Yet still I had no idea how close we were, if at all.

Even this late in the afternoon the sun was still strong, the air sticky, as if there were a storm on its way. My shoulders ached under the weight of my hauberk, which felt as if it were made of lead, not steel. Hardly had we ridden a single mile from the manor

this morning before I was beginning to regret wearing it, and I'd been half tempted to turn back, but every hour lost was one in which the enemy could be getting ever farther away, and so I had borne it as best I could. My gambeson and tunic clung to my skin, so drenched were they in my sweat, and every time we paused to let the rest of the party catch up I had to fend off the flies which followed me.

I glanced up the path towards the hunched, solidly built figure of Ædda, who had stopped some twenty or so paces further ahead. He was my stableman, the ablest tracker in Earnford and possibly in all of the March. I was relying on him. He had lived in these parts longer than most, and he alone knew where we were. Or so, at least, I hoped.

It wasn't just my own spirit which was failing, either, but those of the villagers too. I couldn't speak much of their tongue, but I didn't need to, for I could sense it in not only their tired eyes, which were turned down towards their feet and the path in front of them, but also in their silence as they trudged onwards for mile after mile.

'Lord,' Ædda called. He was crouching low to the ground, waving towards me.

I frowned. If he had lost the trail, then we would have no choice but to turn back. My first thought was one of relief, and straightaway I despised myself for it. If we arrived back home without the women, I would lose all the respect that I had worked so hard to gain. I had promised that I would find them, which was probably a foolish thing to do, but it was done nonetheless, and I was bound by that promise.

'What is it?' I asked, sliding from the saddle, my boots sinking into the soft earth as I landed. It had rained for a while around midday and under the trees the ground was still damp, which meant that the hoof-prints left by the enemy were easily spotted.

But that was not what he had to show me. Instead he held in his palm a whitish object about the length of his middle finger: a comb, fashioned from antler, decorated with crosses and triangles painted red and green, and at one end, so small as to be barely noticeable, a carved initial letter 'H'.

I took it from him, turning it over and over in my fingers as I examined it, using my nail to scratch some of the dirt from its teeth.

‘You think it belongs to one of the women?’ I asked, my voice low.

‘Who else, lord?’ Ædda said. Of all the Englishmen and -women in Earnford, he was one of the few who could speak French. ‘We’re an hour from the nearest village.’

He gazed at me with his one good eye; the other he had lost in a fight some years ago, or so I had heard. Where it had been only an ugly black scar remained. Indeed he had an unsettling appearance; to add to his missing eye, he had been badly burnt across one side of his face, and the skin that was left was white and raw. Nor was he the friendliest of men: easily goaded, he was prone to fits of anger, and not the kind of man one did well to cross. But while many in Earnford were afraid of him, to me he seemed safe enough, especially compared with some of the men I had fought alongside over the years.

I nodded grimly and placed the comb in my coin-pouch for safekeeping. At least we were on the right trail. But whether the fact that it had been dropped here was a good sign or a bad one, I had no idea.

‘Come on,’ I called to the others as I returned to my horse. I vaulted up and into the saddle, feeling a fresh determination stir inside me, and gave the animal a kick to start him moving. ‘We’re close.’

From there the trail led up a steep incline, and so we were forced to dismount and lead our horses on foot. The sun was in front of us, so that whenever the breeze caused the leaves above to part, shafts of golden light would strike us straight in the eyes. The forest was thick with noise: from the chirps of birds as they chased each other between the trees to the buzz of the insects flitting about before my face. Yet despite that it felt strangely quiet, for there was no sign of anyone but us. My sword-arm itched, my fingers curling as if around the hilt of the weapon. I had never much cared for woods. When every direction looked the same, it was so easy to

become lost, and between the ferns and the low branches and fallen trunks, there were too many places where an enemy might hide.

‘Keep a watch out,’ I said to Serlo and my other two knights. To young Tuold, eager and willing; and to Pons, whose gaze was as sharp and cold as the steel in his scabbard. They were not the finest swordsmen I had ever known, and were far from being the most natural riders, but together they formed a formidable band of warriors. Even though I had known them but a year, I trusted them with my life. They had made their oaths to me, had sworn themselves to my service, and so we were bound together, our fates inextricably linked.

The sun dropped lower in the sky and the shadows lengthened as orange light slanted between the trunks. Back home the villagers would be wondering where we were, whether we would be returning that night. In the distance an owl could be heard, its own hunt just beginning. Inwardly I was beginning to question whether there was anything to be gained in going on, when suddenly Tuold, who was in front of me, stopped still.

‘What is it?’ I asked.

He didn’t meet my eyes but fixed his gaze in the distance, somewhere to our right. ‘I thought I heard something.’

‘You’re imagining things again, whelp,’ said Pons. ‘It was probably just the wind.’

‘Or a deer,’ Serlo suggested.

‘It wasn’t the wind—’ Tuold began.

‘Quiet.’ I raised a hand to cut him off. ‘Listen.’

I had always thought my own hearing was good, but Tuold’s was better still; if he thought he had heard something, more often than not he was right. At a mere eighteen years old he wasn’t much more than a boy, but though he had few battles behind him he was nonetheless a skilled fighter, and what he lacked in experience he certainly made up for in ambition.

I stood still, my hand upon my horse’s flank, scarcely even breathing. At first there was nothing but silence. The air was still and for once this day the birds were quiet, and I was about to give the order to start moving again, when there it was: a voice, or

perhaps more than one, and laughter too, faint but unmistakable. How far off, and in what direction, was difficult to tell. The trees had a strange way of masking the sound. Try as I might, I could see nothing through the undergrowth, although I guessed it couldn't have been more than a couple of hundred paces away.

'Do you hear?' asked Turol, his voice low.

I felt my heart pound in my chest. Of course I had no idea if these were indeed the men that we had been pursuing, but it was the first sign of other people we'd had in a good many hours. Again the voices came, a little way to the north, I thought, upon the hill.

'Stay here with the rest until I give the signal,' I said to Ædda.

He nodded but did not speak. Making sure that my sword-belt was firmly fastened, I waved for my knights to follow and left the path in the direction of the voices. Already I could feel myself tensing as I ducked to avoid the low branches and made my way through the bracken, but at the same time I knew we could not make any noise, and so I had to keep reminding myself to slow down, to be careful not to step on fallen branches and other things which might give us away.

We pressed on up the slope. Gradually the voices grew more distinct. Their speech was not one that I was familiar with: not French nor Breton nor Latin. Nor did it sound like English either, from what I'd learnt of that tongue, unless it was a dialect I hadn't heard before.

At last I saw movement. Some twenty or so paces further ahead the trees parted to form a clearing, in the middle of which, gathered around a gently smoking campfire, sat a band of men. I stopped where a tree had fallen across our path, crouching behind it and waving to the others to get down. I laid a hand upon its ridged, flaking bark, the other upon my sword-hilt. The smell of moist earth filled my nose.

'What now?' Serlo whispered.

There were more of them than I had thought: a dozen at least, and I didn't doubt there were others that I couldn't yet see from this vantage. Most of the men had thick moustaches in the style of the majority of the folk who lived in this island, although their

chins were clean-shaven and their hair was cut short around their ears. All wore trews in the loose-fitting style that the Welsh favoured. One who was standing had an axe slung across his back, while I could see round shields propped up against the trees on the edge of the clearing. They were warriors, then. But through the branches and with the sun glaring in my eyes, it was difficult to make out much more.

‘We need to get closer,’ I said.

‘Closer?’ Pons echoed, forgetting to keep his voice down, and he must have realised that he had spoken too loudly for immediately he looked sheepish.

I glared at him and put my finger to my lips. Without another word I rose and began to skirt around the clearing, picking my way little by little towards the edge of the trees. On the far side I could see the Welshmen’s tents pitched in a rough circle, with their horses grazing quietly not far off, and in the middle were seven women. They sat upon the ground, their heads bowed, wrists bound with rope behind their backs.

We had found them. It had taken the whole day – it seemed we had chased them halfway across this island – but we had done it.

We couldn’t celebrate yet though, for the hardest part was still to come. And my heart sank, for as I cast my gaze about the clearing I counted no fewer than sixteen Welshmen. Too many to risk facing in open battle, especially when only a handful of us knew how to wield a weapon properly. And so the only way we were going to overcome them was if we could surprise them.

I glanced back the way we had come, but the rest of our party was now out of sight. I turned to Turoid. ‘Go,’ I told him. ‘Tell Ædda to bring the others.’

He nodded and set off down the slope, soon disappearing into the undergrowth.

‘Now we wait,’ I said, crouching low to the ground, trying to keep as still as possible, although it didn’t appear as if any of the Welshmen were on watch. Some drank from leather flasks while others were busy cleaning their teeth with green hazel shoots or

rubbing them with scraps of wool-cloth. As a race they were meticulous about their appearance, and they obsessed over their teeth more than anything else. From time to time one glanced over his shoulder at the women, or got up from the fire to check on the horses. Most had unbuckled their scabbards or laid their spears down on the ground: something I would never have allowed my men to do, but which might just give us the chance we needed. But then what reason did they have to think there might be trouble? Doubtless they would have expected us to have given up the chase long before now, and that was their mistake.

I glanced about, searching for one who looked like their leader. It wasn't easy, for they were all dressed in similar fashion; none of them had mail, and only a few looked as though they possessed helmets. But then the one with the axe turned about, and I saw a thick silver chain around his neck and a gold ring proudly displayed upon his shield-hand. Liquid that might have been ale dripped from his sodden moustache. He would be the first I would kill.

'Here they come,' Serlo murmured.

I looked up and saw Turolld returning. Behind him was Ædda, followed by the rest of our party in single file. I gritted my teeth, praying that they were silent, for the slightest noise could betray us. But the air was filled with the Welshmen's laughter, and they seemed not to hear. One by one the villagers assembled behind me: fourteen spears to add to our four swords. I only hoped it would be enough.

Turolld crouched beside me. 'What's our plan?'

'We could come from two sides, trap them in the middle,' Serlo said.

I shook my head. That would need more men than we had, and would take time besides. The longer we spent organising ourselves, the greater the chance we would give ourselves away.

'We all go together,' I said, making sure that all my men could hear me. 'The four of us will lead, killing as many as we can in the first onslaught. By the time they realise what's happening, with any luck we ought to outnumber them.'

It was hardly the most sophisticated of plans, but I could think



of nothing better. Neither, it seemed, could any of the others, for they made no objection.

I gave the same instructions to Ædda, who passed them on to his countrymen in their own tongue as they gathered around. My shield hung by its long strap across my back; I brought it over my shoulder and gripped the leather braces firmly in my left hand, at the same time adjusting my helmet, making sure the nasal-piece sat comfortably.

About twenty paces lay between us and the enemy: ground which we'd have to cover quickly if we were to retain the advantage of surprise. I didn't doubt it was possible, since they all had to find their feet and their weapons before they could do anything. But we had to choose the right moment, when the enemy were most off their guard—

'*Hild*,' said one of the villagers behind me. It was Lyfing, the miller's son, a usually sullen boy of about fifteen with straw-like hair. He rose, looking if he were about to start forwards; I grabbed him by the shoulder, at the same time clamping my other hand across his mouth to stop him speaking.

'Quiet,' I hissed. 'Not yet.'

He tried to struggle, but I was by far the stronger, and he soon gave up. Ædda muttered something in the boy's ear – translating for him, I guessed. I glanced towards the enemy, hoping that none of them had heard, and it was then that I saw what was troubling him. A red-haired Welshman had left the fire and gone over to the circle of women, where he was dragging one of the younger ones to her feet. She must be *Hild*, then. I recognised her, for she and Lyfing often spent time in each other's company back in Earnford, though until then I wouldn't have been able to say which of the girls she was. Her hair had fallen loose and she was shrieking as she lashed out with her feet. If anything, her oppressor seemed to be enjoying the challenge, for there was a wide grin upon his face. She fell to her knees, only to receive a slap across the cheek, and once more I had to grip the boy's shoulder to keep him back.

One of the older women rushed to help *Hild*, throwing herself at the Welshman even though her hands were tied, trying to bite

him, it seemed, but he pushed her away and she fell face first to the ground, prompting laughter from his friends, who were now turning to see what was happening. All of them were jeering, shouting what must have been insults at the women, as if it were a game. Hild, on her back, tried to scramble away. Laughing, the red-haired one kicked her in the side, and she crumpled.

‘Hild,’ Lyfing said again, suddenly breaking free of my grip and rushing forward. ‘Hild!’

‘Lyfing—’ I began, but it was too late to stop him. Cursing, I sprang to my feet and the steel rang out as I pulled my sword from its sheath. ‘Now!’ I called.

As one we rushed from the shadows of the forest, a horde of French and English in common cause, with spears and knives and all manner of blades raised to the sky, gleaming in the late sun.

‘Kill them,’ I roared. ‘Kill them!’

I saw the startled looks on the enemy’s faces, and felt a surge of joy, for I knew this would be quick. And I saw their leader, the one with the axe, standing before me, too dumbstruck to draw his weapon or even to move. I was upon him in a heartbeat, running him through, twisting my sword in his stomach, and he was dead before he knew what had happened. Blood spilt from his chest, staining the grass crimson, but no sooner had I freed my blade from his corpse than I was turning, making room for my sword-arm, and as the next one rose to attack me I tore the edge across the side of his face, and with a scream he fell.

The rest were jumping to their feet, snatching up their weapons from where they lay, but it was too late. The battle-calm was upon me and every thrust, every cut, ingrained through long hours of practice, came as if by instinct. Another charged at me, but it was the charge of a desperate man, and I danced easily out of reach before backhanding a blow across his shoulders and neck. Around me all was slaughter. Swords and spears flashed silver; the sound of steel upon steel rang out and the air was filled with the stench of fresh-spilt guts. Five of the enemy lay dead or wounded while only one of our men, so far as I could see, was hurt.

‘For St Ouen and King Guillaume,’ I shouted. ‘For Normandy, for Earnford and for England!’

I saw the gleam of a spearpoint to my right and I turned just in time as another of the enemy rushed at me. I raised my shield to fend off the blow; it glanced off the boss, sending a shudder through my shoulder, but before my assailant could recover for another attack I rushed at him, catching him off balance and sending him crashing to the ground, his weapon falling from his grasp. I stood over him, and it was then that I noticed his red hair. He met my eyes, but only briefly. He didn’t even have time to let out a shout before I drove my sword down through his ribs into his heart.

I looked about for my next kill, but the fighting had spread now as the enemy were being forced back, and there was no one, either friend or enemy, who was close. No one except the girl Hild, who was kneeling beside one of the corpses, staring up at me, her wide eyes full of tears. Blood was on her cheek and on her dress, and for a moment I was confused, until I glanced down at the body and saw that it belonged to Lyfing. His eyes were closed and his tunic was soaked crimson where a great gash had been opened in his chest, no doubt by the red-haired one.

‘I’m sorry,’ I told Hild, though the words would mean nothing to her. I should have protected Lyfing, I thought, protected him from himself. I ought to have known he would try to save his woman first, since in his place I would have done the same.

I had no time to dwell on it, though, for the fighting was not yet over. Beyond the campfire, the enemy’s horses, frightened by the noise, were rearing up, tugging at the ropes tethering them to the trees as they tried to free themselves. And the panic was spreading to the Welsh themselves, who had seen their leader and several of their comrades fall and had no wish to be next. Some tried to flee, and were pursued by Serlo along with most of the villagers; others fought on, preferring a heroic death, but they were no match for trained swordsmen such as Pons and Tuold, and were soon cut down. That left just six, gathered in a ring with their backs to one another, their spears held before them. But we were many and they were few, and they must have seen the hopelessness

of their position, for after exchanging glances they all let their weapons fall to the ground.

I made them form a line and get down on their knees while the villagers rushed to their womenfolk, loosening their bonds and hugging them close. Not an hour ago they must have given up hope of ever seeing them again, yet now they were reunited. I could barely imagine their relief.

Pons nodded towards the ones who had yielded. 'What should we do with them?'

I cast my gaze over each of them in turn, and I saw the fear in their eyes. But they had sent several of my men to their deaths today, and I was not inclined to be merciful.

'Leave them to me,' I said, and then to the Welsh themselves: 'Do any of you speak French?'

At first no one answered, and I was about to repeat myself in the English tongue, when one spoke up. He was probably the youngest of all of them, of an age with Lyfing, I thought: a scrawny lad with lank hair. Possibly this was his first expedition.

'I – I do,' he said, his voice trembling.

I marched across, my mail chinking with each step, and stood over him. 'Whom do you serve?'

He cast his gaze down. 'Rhiwallon ap Cynfyn, lord.'

'Rhiwallon?' I asked. I'd heard that name before; he was foremost among the Welsh princes who held sway in these parts beyond the dyke. Indeed I'd heard it said that he called himself king, though there was precious little in these parts to be king of. Until now I'd never spoken to any who knew him directly. 'He sent you?'

The boy nodded cautiously, as if unsure whether this was the right answer to give or not.

'You took something that didn't belong to you,' I said, slowly enough that he could understand me. 'The death of your companions is the price that you pay.'

He nodded but remained silent. For one so young he did well to keep his composure, when many men twice his age would have crumbled.

'Go back to your master and tell him you failed. Tell him what

happened here, and mention to him the name of Tancred a Dinant. If you're lucky he'll spare your life, as I've done. Do you understand?'

'Yes, lord.' I saw a lump form in the boy's throat as he swallowed, but he did not move.

'Then go,' I told him. 'Or else I just might change my mind.'

He scrambled to his feet, hesitating just for a moment while he glanced at his fellow countrymen. The blades of my men were pointed at their backs, their heads were bowed and they didn't speak. He must have seen that he'd suffer the same fate as them if he waited any longer, and so he darted away across the clearing, towards the west and the dying light, into the depths of the forest. I raised a hand to Serlo and Ædda so that they knew to let him go, then went to survey the corpses strewn about the clearing, to see if they had on them anything of worth.

'What about the rest?' Pons called after me. 'Are we going to take them back with us?'

I glanced towards Hild, clutching at Lyfing's limp body, the tears flowing down her cheeks. I thought of all those men back in Earnford whose lives had been cut short earlier that day, and I thought too of their families who would be grieving for them. They had not deserved to die.

And I knew what had to be done.

'Kill them,' I said, without so much as turning around. 'Kill them all.'

They were warriors the same as us, and as such they faced their deaths with dignity. But nevertheless when the end itself came, they screamed as any other man would, and I hoped that the boy running back to his lord would hear those screams and know how fortunate he had been.