

One

The smoke on the horizon was the first sign that the enemy were nearby. It billowed in great plumes above the fields, spreading like an ink-stain upon the fresh parchment of the sky. Save for the occasional bleating of sheep in the pastures and the warbling of skylarks hovering high above, there was no sound. A thin drizzle fell, the wind had died to almost nothing and everything else was still, which made the sight of those plumes in the distance all the more unnerving.

Straightaway I reined in my destrier, Fyrheard, and raised my hand to those following as a signal to halt. My men, riding to either side of me, responded at once, as did the mounted archers at the rear of our column, but the oxen-drivers were too busy talking between themselves to notice, and only my shout of warning stopped them and their animals from colliding with us. I cast a glare in their direction and berated them in the English tongue, but they didn't seem to notice. Suddenly their minds were on the distant smoke, at which they were pointing and shouting in alarm.

'A hall-burning, do you think, lord?' Serlo asked. One of my two household knights, he was a bear of a man with a fearsome sword-arm and a temper to match: not the kind of man that I would have liked to face in a fight, and I was glad to count him as a friend.

'If it is, it wouldn't be the first,' I replied. Nor, I suspected, was it likely to be the last. In the last fortnight the rebels had made half a dozen such raids, always in different places but always following the same pattern: striking as if from nowhere to lay the torch to a village or manor, before just as quickly withdrawing to their boats and melting away into the marshes. By the time word of what had

taken place had reached us and the king had sent out men to meet them in battle, they were already long gone. Still, it was rare that they should strike so far from their island stronghold. The castle at Cantebrigia was barely two hours behind us; the rebels were either growing bolder or else more foolhardy, and I couldn't make up my mind which.

'What now?' Pons asked, his voice low. The second of my knights, he possessed a sharp wit and an equally sharp tongue, which he often struggled to restrain, but there was nothing light-hearted about his manner now.

'We could try to find another way around,' Serlo suggested.

'Not if we want to reach the king's camp by dusk,' I said. Aside from the main tracks, I wasn't at all familiar with this land: a flat and featureless expanse of pasture and barley fields, crossed by streams and rivers narrow and wide. What I did know was that there were few well-made ways along which fully laden carts could travel, with bridges and fords that they could cross. We could easily waste several hours if we decided to leave the road and strike out across the country.

Pons frowned. 'Do we go on, then?'

'They could be lying in wait for us,' Serlo pointed out.

I considered. On the one hand I had no wish to lead us all into a trap, but on the other it seemed unlikely the enemy would announce their presence so clearly if an ambush was what they had in mind. Besides, it had been several weeks since the rebels had made any serious attempts to waylay our supply trains – not since the king had begun sending out parties of knights and other warriors to accompany them and ward off any would-be attackers.

And that was how I came to be here. I, Tancred the Breton, Tancred of Earnford. The man who had helped win the gates in the battle at Eoferwic, who had led the charge against the pretender, Eadgar Ætheling, faced him upon the bridge and almost killed him. The same man who by night had entered the enemy's camp in Befulic, rescued his lord from imprisonment at the hands of the Danes, and captured the feared Wild Eadric, the scourge of the Marches. I had stared death in the face more often than I cared to

remember and each time lived to tell the tale. I had done what others thought impossible. By rights I should have been rewarded with vast lands and halls of stone, chests brimming with silver, gilded swords and helmets with which to arm myself, stables of fleet-footed Andalusian horses that I could offer as gifts to my followers. I should have been leading forays against the enemy, hunting down their foraging parties, training at arms with my companions, or else helping to hone the shield- and spear-skills of those less proficient in the ways of war.

But I was not, and with every day my anger grew. For instead of being allowed to make use of my experience, instead I found myself reduced to this escort duty, riding back and forth across this featureless country day after day, all to protect a dozen scrawny oxen, their stinking, dung-covered owners and these rickety carts, which were constantly becoming stuck or else collapsing under the weight of the goods they carried. It would have been bearable had the rebels ever dared approach us, since at least then I'd have had the chance to test my sword-arm. Probably sensibly, however, they preferred to go where the pickings were easy and where they could wreak the greatest devastation, rather than risk their lives for the sake of whatever supplies we guarded, which usually comprised no more than some loaves of bread, barrels of ale and rounds of cheese, timber planks, nails and bundles of firewood – all things that our army needed to keep it warm and fed, but which, if the reports we received were reliable, the rebels already had in plenty upon their island fastness at Elyg.

‘What are you thinking, lord?’ Serlo asked.

‘I’m thinking that those smoke-plumes are rising thickly,’ I said, meaning that those fires hadn’t been burning for long, which in turn meant that those who had caused them couldn’t be far off. And I was thinking, too, that this was the closest I had come to crossing swords with any of the rebels on this campaign. The battle-hunger rose inside me; my sword-hand tingled with the familiar itch. I longed to hear the clash of steel ringing out, to feel my blade-edge biting into flesh, to let the battle-joy fill me. And as those thoughts ran through my mind, an idea began to form.

‘The three of us will ride on ahead,’ I said. ‘If the enemy are lurking, I want to find them.’

Serlo and Pons nodded. While they were unafraid to speak their minds and while I often relied upon their counsel, they both respected me enough to follow whatever course of action I chose. The same could not be said of the company of archers that had been placed under my command, who guarded the rear of our column. Lordless men, they made their living by selling their services to anyone who would pay, owing allegiance to their purses and their purses alone. Even now I could make out the mutterings of their captain, a ruddy-faced man by the name of Hamo, who possessed a large gut and a sullen manner, and whom I had little liking for.

I turned to face him. At first he didn’t notice me, being too busy exchanging snide remarks with his friends about how I was frightened of a little smoke, and how he’d heard it said that Bretons were all cowards, and that was why I’d been tasked with this escort duty, because I was too weak-willed for anything else. Clearly he knew nothing of who I was, or the deeds I had accomplished. He was lucky that I was too poor to afford the blood-price for his killing, or I would have long since struck him down for his insolence.

As it was, I had to wait a few moments before one of his comrades saw that I was watching and nudged him sharply in the side. He looked up; straightaway his tongue retreated inside his head, while his cheeks turned an even deeper shade of red.

‘Lord,’ he said, bowing extravagantly, which prompted a smirk from a few of the others. ‘What are your instructions?’

I eyed him for a few heartbeats, silently daring him to break into a smile, but luckily for his sake he wasn’t that stupid. Although he was not averse to muttering behind my back, he knew better than to defy me openly. I reckoned he was probably ten years older than me, which was a good age for someone whose life was lived on the field of battle. The summer just gone was my twenty-eighth, and although no one could yet call me old, I had ceased thinking of myself as a young man.

‘Wait for us here,’ I told him, trying to hold my temper and my tongue. ‘I want to find out what’s happened.’

Hamo frowned. 'We were ordered not to leave the carts undefended.'

'I'm not leaving them undefended. You're staying with them.'

Strictly speaking my duties didn't extend to hunting down enemy bands, a fact of which we were both well aware. But if Hamo thought I was going to let this opportunity pass, he was mistaken.

'Lord—' he began to protest, but I cut him off.

'Enough,' I said, and then pointed to the four of the archers nearest me: a full third of his company. 'You'll come with me.'

The four glanced at their leader, waiting for his assent. He said nothing but for a few moments held my gaze, resentment in his eyes, before nodding and gesturing for them to follow me. No doubt he would add this to his list of grievances, and find some way of using it against me, but I would worry about that another time. For now I had greater concerns.

'Keep a watch out on all sides and have your bows ready,' I said as we began to ride off. 'We'll be back before long.'

'And if the enemy happen upon us while you're gone?' asked Hamo. 'What are we supposed to do then?'

'Kill them,' I answered with a shrug. 'Isn't that what you have arrows for?'

It wasn't much of a reassurance, nor did I expect it to be, but it was all the advice I had to offer. But then I doubted that Hamo and his men would choose to put up much of a fight. Rather, if it looked as though they were outnumbered they would probably turn tail at the first opportunity, abandoning the carts and their contents in order to save their own skins. If they did, they needn't worry about ever showing their faces in our camp again, and at least King Guillaume wouldn't need to keep wasting good silver on them. Although I respected their skills with bow and blade, I didn't trust them, and I was far from the only one to share that sentiment. Sellswords were considered by many to be among the lowest class of men. Exiles and oath-breakers for the most part, they were entirely lacking in honour and scruple. Many would probably kill their own mothers if they thought they could profit from doing so.

With that we left Hamo and the rest of his company, and struck out across the flat country. Seven men did not make much of an army, especially when I was used to commanding scores and at times even hundreds, but it would have to do. Unlike their captain, the four archers were all young lads. A couple of them were taller even than myself, and I was not exactly short. Each was broad in the chest, with the sturdy shoulders and thick arms needed to draw a string of any great weight. I myself had never mastered the bow, instead preferring as most knights did to hone my skills with sword and lance. But I knew from experience the slaughter that well-trained bowmen could wreak. They had proven their worth in the great battle at Hæstinges, firstly by inflicting great casualties amongst the English ranks and softening them to our charge, and later, it was said, by wounding the usurper Harold Godwineson, who according to rumour had received an arrow in his eye shortly before he fell to Duke Guillaume's sword. Whether that was true or not, no one knew for certain, although I'd met several men who claimed theirs was the arrow that had struck him.

That was five years ago. Since that day much had changed; I had seen friends and comrades die and gained others from unexpected quarters, had striven hard to win myself lands of my own only for them to be laid waste by my enemies, had found fame and honour and love and come close to losing it all.

One thing, though, remained the same, for even five years after we had triumphed at Hæstinges and King Guillaume had received the crown that belonged to him by right – the crown that had been promised him by his predecessor, King Eadward, and had been won with the Pope's blessing – still many among the English refused to submit to him. And so we found ourselves here in this bleak corner of East Anglia, trying to snuff out the final embers of rebellion, so far without success. Already we had been in the field for more than two months, and what did we have to show for it? A mud-ridden camp in which half the king's army was succumbing to fever and flux, while hundreds more lay dead after earlier attempts to assault the enemy upon the Isle of Elyg had ended in failure. Meanwhile the rebels continued to taunt us with their constant raids on the

surrounding land. With every week they held out against us, scores more flocked to their banners, so that they had grown from a paltry couple of hundred to a host reckoned at nearly three thousand strong, and perhaps even larger than that. In truth no one knew for certain, and in the absence of any reliable information, the numbers grew ever wilder. Which meant that if we saw even the slightest chance to inflict some damage upon the enemy, we had to take it.

Keeping a careful watch out on all sides, we rode towards the source of the smoke. Soon I began to make out what only a short time ago would have been barns, hovels and cattle-sheds, though there was little left of them now. Amidst the fallen-in posts and roof-beams I spied glimmers of flame. Carrion birds cawed as they circled above the ruins in pairs and threes and fours; from somewhere came the forlorn bleating of a goat, although I could not see it. There was no other sound, nor any sign of movement, nor any glint of mail or spearpoints, which suggested the rebels had already left this place. Even so, we approached slowly. In my younger days my recklessness had often been my undoing, but experience had taught me the value of caution. The last thing I wanted was to rush in only to find ourselves in a snare, surrounded and outnumbered and with no hope of retreat. And so the four archers kept arrows nocked to their bowstrings, ready to let fly if they saw anything that looked like a foeman, while the rest of us gripped our lance-hafts firmly.

The blackened remains of the manor stood upon a low rise. As we climbed, it became clear that we were the only ones around. Anywhere that might have provided a hiding place for the enemy had been razed to the ground. Livestock had been slaughtered in the fields and the pens, while the corpses of men, women and children alike lay in the yards and the vegetable gardens, their clothes and hair congealed with blood. Feathered shafts protruded from the chests and backs of some, while others had gaping wounds to their necks and thighs, and bright gashes across their faces. No one had been spared. The stench of burnt flesh mixed with freshly spilt guts hung in the air: smells at which I might once have retched, but which by now had grown only too familiar. In the past few

years I'd witnessed so many burnings of this kind that it was hard to be much moved by them. Still, it was rare that the enemy left so little in their wake.

'They killed even their own kind,' I murmured, scarcely able to believe it, though it wasn't the first time I'd seen it happen. Usually the rebels would kill the lord and his retainers, if they happened to be French, but leave the English folk unharmed. Sometimes, though, their desire for blood consumed them, and they wouldn't stop until all around was ruin and death. Perhaps the villagers had tried to fight back, or else the rebels had judged them guilty of falling subject to a foreign lord. I could only guess the reason.

Usually, though, there would be at least one person left alive. One to tell the tale. One to spread the news of what had happened here. One to foster fear of those who had done this. I knew because it was what I would have done.

We halted not far from what I guessed had once been a church, although there seemed to be little to distinguish it from the remains of the other hovels save for a waist-high stone cross that stood at its western end. One wall alone remained standing, but, as we dismounted, that too collapsed inwards, sending a great cloud of dust and still-glowing ash billowing up.

Beside me, Pons shook his head and muttered something that I could not entirely make out but which was most likely a curse.

Serlo turned to me. 'Why do you think they did this, lord?'

To that question there was no simple answer. Even if the lord of this manor had been a Frenchman, as seemed likely, the people living here would have been kinsfolk of the enemy. And apart from a few sheep and goats and chickens, most of which they seemed to have killed rather than take with them, what could there have been in a place like this to make it worth attacking?

Only one explanation came to mind. 'They wanted to send us a message,' I said.

'A message?' Serlo echoed, frowning.

Slowly it was beginning to make sense. The reason why they had come to this place, so far from their encampment upon the Isle.

'The enemy weren't looking for plunder or captives,' I said. 'If

they were, they could have chosen to attack any number of manors closer to Elyg.'

'A show of force,' Pons put in, understanding at last. 'That's what they wanted. The more damage they wreak and the more ruthless they appear, the more panic they spread.'

I nodded. 'They want to prove that they don't fear us. That they can strike anywhere, at any time.'

And that was a bad sign, for it suggested that they were not only growing in confidence but also that they had men to spare for such expeditions. Before, they had preferred to keep to their corner of the marshlands and wait for us to come to them, only raiding occasionally and even then in places where they judged the risks to be fewest. But no longer. Now they laid waste the land with impunity, taunting us, and all the while we were powerless to stop them.

I swore aloud. I'd hoped that we might find some of the enemy still here, but in fact they were probably several miles away by now, which left us nothing more that we could usefully do except return to Hamo and the carts. All we had accomplished was to waste an hour or more on our journey. Back at the king's camp in Brandune the clerks would be waiting: pale, weasel-eyed men who recorded with quill and parchment every last crumb of bread and drop of ale that entered the storehouses and was distributed among the men. They wouldn't thank us if we arrived late and they had to complete their work by candlelight. While I always took a certain enjoyment from annoying them – one of the few pleasures afforded by this escort work – it would mean that I'd have to put up with even more of their carping, and I wasn't convinced it was worth it.

Fyrheard pawed restlessly at the ground. I shared his sentiment. I was about to give the order to turn back when amidst the calls of the crows, which had descended to pick at the bodies, came what sounded like a voice, not far off but weak and indistinct.

'Did anyone else hear that?' I asked.

'All I heard was my stomach rumbling,' muttered one of the archers, whose name I had forgotten but whose gaunt face and large ears I recognised. 'The sooner we return, the sooner we can eat.'

‘You’ll be going hungry unless you keep quiet,’ I snapped. That prompted a snigger from the archer’s comrades, but they fell quiet the instant I glared at them, and it was as well that I did, or else I might have missed the voice when it came again: a low moaning, like someone in pain.

‘Over there,’ said Serlo.

I looked in the direction of his pointed finger. Through clouds of smoke and ash I glimpsed a broken haywain and, lying beside it, what at first I took for a dead body; yet the corpse was moving its head, just slightly but enough that I could be sure that my eyes weren’t deceiving me.

I strode across the muddy churchyard towards the figure. He lay on his back, coughing up crimson gobs. His tunic and treads were torn, while his face was streaked with mud. An arrow had buried itself in his torso, just above his groin. Around the place where the shaft was lodged his tunic was congealed with so much blood that it was a wonder he still lived. He looked about fifty or so in years; his grey hair was flecked with strands of white and cut short at the back in the French style, which suggested he was a Norman. On a leather thong around his neck hung a wooden cross that suggested he had either been Mass-priest here, or possibly chaplain to the local lord.

I knelt down by his side. The others gathered around me and I called for one of them to fetch something for the priest to drink. No sooner had I done so than his eyes opened, only by a fraction but enough that he could see me looking down on him.

‘Who . . .’ he began, but faltered over the words. His voice was weak, no more than a croak. ‘Who are you?’

‘Friends,’ I assured him. ‘My name is Tancred. We came as soon as we saw the smoke.’

‘You came too late.’ His face contorted in pain as once more he groaned and clutched at the shaft protruding from his gut. ‘Too late.’

I tried to lift his hands away so as to get a better look at the wound. If we could only remove the arrow, I thought, it might be possible to staunch the flow and close up the hole. But no sooner

had I prised his trembling fingers from the sticky cloth than I knew it would be no use. In my time I'd seen men recover from all manner of injuries, some worse than this, but not many. I'd learnt a little about wounds and how to treat them from the infirmarian in the monastery where I grew up, and over the years since had often watched leech-doctors at work. That small amount of knowledge was enough to tell me that he was too far gone, even for someone skilled in the healing arts, which none of us were.

Serlo crouched beside me, holding a leather flask. 'Ale,' he said. 'There's not much left.'

'It'll be enough,' I replied as I took it and removed the stopper. From the weight and the sound it made as I swirled the liquid about I reckoned it was probably about a quarter full. I turned back to the priest. 'Can you sit up?'

He shook his head, teeth clenched in pain. His breath came in stutters, making it hard for him to speak. 'I am beyond the help of ale. Besides, soon there will be no more pain. I shall be with God, and all will be well. There is only one thing you can do for me.'

'What is it, father?'

He gave a great hacking cough, and as he did so his whole body shuddered. Thankfully the fit did not last long and, sighing wearily, he lay back once more, at the same time motioning with his fingers for me to come closer. I leant towards him. There were tears in the old man's eyes, running down his cheeks.

'Bring to justice the ones who did this,' he said. 'Their leader too, that spawn of the Devil. The one they call Hereward. Promise me that.'

'Hereward?' I repeated, wanting to make sure I had heard him rightly. 'He did this?'

'So they called him, yes.'

That name was well known to me, as it was to everyone in our army, but I hadn't expected to hear it today, in this place. Hereward was one of the leaders of the rebels; it was he who had instigated this particular rising here in the fens. Some said he was a prominent thegn who had held land in these parts under the old king, Eadward. Others claimed he was a creature of the forest, abandoned at birth

by his mother and raised by wolves, which explained his ruthless nature and his lack of Christian mercy. In truth no one knew where he had come from; his name had been first spoken only last autumn. While we had been campaigning with the king in the north, Hereward had raided the abbey at Burh, slain several of the monks and carried away all their treasures, including shrines and gilded crucifixes, richly bound and decorated gospel books and even, it was said, the golden crown that had rested upon Christ's head on the rood beneath the chancel arch. With the help of some Danish swords-for-hire he'd torched the town and monastery, and afterwards had fled by ship across the marshlands to the Isle of Elyg, where he now chose to make his stand against us, bolstered by the hundreds of other English outlaws who had flocked to his banner.

It was because of him that we were here in this godforsaken corner of the kingdom. It was because of him that, barely half a year after we had defeated the Northumbrians and their Danish allies at Befealic and sent the pretender Eadgar scurrying back to the protection of the King of Alba, we'd found ourselves once more summoned by the king to join him on another of his campaigns.

Yet if the old priest was right, and it was indeed Hereward who had done this, and if we could kill or capture him—

A new sense of purpose stirred within me. 'How many of them were there?' I asked.

The priest's eyes were closed again, and his skin was as pale as snow. His time was near. But if I was to do what he had asked of me, he had to give me answers. I clasped his wrinkled, bloodstained hand, squeezing it firmly to try to keep him with us a little longer. At once he blinked and came to, a look of confusion upon his face, as if he did not quite know where he was.

'How many, father?' I said again.

He groaned as if with the effort of remembering, and after a moment managed to answer, 'A dozen, perhaps fifteen. No more.'

Roughly two men to every one of us, then. Fewer than I had been expecting, but still more than I would have liked to face, especially when one of them was Hereward himself, whose sword-edge had already claimed countless victims, if the stories told about

him were true. No warrior ever won himself great fame without some measure of risk along the way, however. The difficulty came in learning which risks to embrace and which to avoid, and this seemed to me one worth taking.

‘When did they leave?’ I asked the priest.

‘Not an hour ago,’ he said, his eyelids drooping. ‘They went . . .’
‘Where?’

At first I thought he was slipping away and that we wouldn’t get an answer, but then I spotted the faintest movement of his lips. I leant closer, having to put my ear almost to his mouth in order to hear him.

‘Promise me,’ he said, barely managing a whisper. ‘Promise me.’

‘I will bring them to justice, father,’ I said. ‘I swear it upon the cross. But you have to tell me where they went.’

‘North.’ The words came slowly now. ‘They went north. That much I know. Now, let me rest.’

I nodded and squeezed the priest’s hand one last time, then rested it carefully back upon his chest, which still rose and fell, though so slightly as to be almost imperceptible. Between breaths he whispered something that I could not entirely make out, but which from a couple of Latin words I guessed was probably a prayer for the safekeeping of his soul. Not that he had the chance to finish it, for he was still in the middle of whatever he was uttering when a pained expression came across his face and a long groan left his lips. His eyes closed once more; moments later his chest ceased moving, and that was when I knew he had left this world and that he was, at last, with God.

I made the sign of the cross across my breast as I got to my feet, and out of the corner of my eye I saw Serlo and Pons do the same. Around us the houses still burnt. The wind was rising, tugging at my tunic, blowing the smoke towards us and causing tongues of vibrant flame to flare up amongst what remained of the smoking timbers, wattle and thatch.

‘What now?’ asked the archer with the gaunt face, his expression now devoid of humour.

‘We ride,’ I answered.

Hereward and his band couldn't have got far in an hour. No doubt they would be making for wherever they had moored their boats. Since few vessels large and sturdy enough to carry a horse could navigate the marshes, I guessed they would most likely be on foot, which meant that we still had a chance of catching up with them.

Without delay we mounted up. I would have liked to bury the priest if only to save his body from the crows, but there was no time. Instead we left him by the haywain where he lay, his expression serene as if he were simply sleeping.

Only later, when the wreckage of the village was far behind us, did I realise that I hadn't even learnt his name.