

## **The Castle of St. Valery sur Somme**

The wind could rage against the castle walls but it could not topple the stones carved by human hands. Like a bastion of the duke's hopes the fortress resisted the elemental weather that had plagued his designs for many weeks. It neither bowed to the powerful gusts that destroyed the wooden hulls of ships unfortunate to be caught out at sea, nor leaked beneath the constant torrent of rain. As Guillaume moved down the passage to the great hall the only sign of the continuation of the autumnal storms was the occasionally more excited flickering of the torches that lit his way.

Within the confines of the castle the barons were quartered with some degree of comfort whilst their men huddled inside tents close to the fleet with only the thickness of the canvas sheet between them and the elements.

All eyes turned to the door as a guard flung it open and the duke entered at pace and with a purposeful expression. He glanced over their faces quickly and noted the scowls on more than one. Delay plagued them again only this time it was not the offence of two idle soldiers that threatened the future of the expedition. This was more serious; the barons themselves were talking of returning home.

"My Lords, you look well." Guillaume spoke in a jovial manner although he knew full well that he could not expect the same from those already seated as he joined them at the large table. As he sat down he looked first at his brother Robert, seated strategically half way down the table on the left, and then at his other brother Odo, sat further down and on the right. It had been tempting to place them closer at hand but that risked creating factions over the length of the table, this way he hoped to break the dissenters up by placing his most loyal men amongst them.

"We have waited too long," Protested Ranulf, Vicomte of the Bessin. Several others voiced their agreement. "If we cannot move forward then we should disperse for the winter and return in the spring."

"To what advantage?" Guillaume asked reasonably. "Our power is gathered here at St Valéry, the fleet stands ready. For all this to be dispersed and then collected again next spring, so much time would be lost, so much money would have to be spent again."

"And Harold Godwinson will grow more secure upon his usurped throne," Robert added in support.

“We have our own estates to tend to, My Lord, we have been absent too long to little effect. Autumn passes us by and winter marches closely upon its heels. I would know that all is well with my property,” Ranulf countered.

“You should appoint men of trust and merit to the administration of your estate,” Guillaume said simply. “This is not the first time that you have been abroad from your lands at my command; were they ruined by neglect the last time that you took to the campaign?”

Ranulf paused a moment before answering. The tension in the room was palpably growing.

“My lord knows that I have supported him in this endeavour as with many previous endeavours, but the weather intercedes. We sit here in St Valéry as we sat in Dives Sur Mer, merely waiting. The men laze and consume the rations that are paid for out of our purses and return us nothing in service.”

“What service can a soldier sit on his arse all day render?” Another interjected to popular agreement.

“It is not that we wish to avoid our duty to you My Lord,” Ranulf continued, “but rather that the elements set themselves against your design. We can make no further headway. There are no ports further along the coast that are friendly to this expedition. We are stalled.” A general assent rose from the other lords sat around the table.

The dissent was beginning and Guillaume knew that a key moment had arrived. His authority as the Duke of Normandy was stronger than it had ever been, his ducal court the envy of princes, the lands over which he ruled at their greatest extent, but all of his achievements were now threatened. He could dismiss the army and suffer a little loss of respect and reputation for an act of commonsense amongst these nobles, but his enemies would present the facts differently. He was walking a fateful path as thin as a blade-edge. He could exert his ducal authority and keep these barons here all winter if he wished but their loyalty to him would only be eaten away by resentment and their support ultimately lost.

To what purpose should I act with an iron fist? To only satisfy my own pride?

There were the lesser-noblemen too; those here under duress that had been forced to present hostages to the duke’s court to guarantee their compliance. They would surely look to turn any failings on Guillaume’s part to their own advantage. Dissent could quickly turn into rebellion and the enemies beyond the borders of Normandy would exploit that situation to his destruction. He felt the weight of the moment pressing down on his shoulders. His future would rest on how successful he was in keeping the Norman nobility in line with his own desires. Any weakness now would spell disaster but at the same time he had to respect the power of his allies. Individually none of them posed a real threat but collectively they could overthrow him. The danger was very real.

“My Lords, I hear your words and you should know that they have been considered already,” Guillaume told them, affecting a conciliatory disposition. “In truth none here thought that this expedition would fall foul of such un-seasonal weather. Our spies in England tell us that there the storms are restricted to the coasts only, that the sun shines to ripen fields of gold, a bumper harvest to be brought in by the people on the land. The Saxons bask whilst we shiver.”

“Then does God favour the English?”

“God favours the just and we carry his banner, given to us by the hand of Pope Alexander the Second himself,” Odo predictably answered.

“Then mayhap you should unfurl the banner and let God see it,” someone suggested. “Mayhap Harold has one of his own, flying over England’s golden fields, and God mistakes it for ours?”

Nervous laughter followed the comment. Guillaume sat with his chin resting on his hand but allowed a weak smile to crease his face. He glanced at Odo and wondered if his brother the bishop might assail the speaker with religious indignation.

“If God declines to send us a favourable wind by the Feast of Saint Michael the Archangel then I might concede that very point.” Odo eventually replied. “However, I think that there is some merit in reminding everyone that we do have the pope’s blessing in this enterprise and Harold Godwinson has been excommunicated for his unholy crimes. It might do many a soul good to see the banner unfurled and paraded around the camp.”

“Would you be willing to undertake this duty?” Guillaume asked.

“Of course, My Lord,” Odo smiled in return. “I have many priests who seem as indolent as your soldiers. I will stir them to it.”

“As welcome as this event may prove in lifting our spirits it is only a momentary diversion from what concerns us here. After the parade of the banner the men will return to days of inactivity again.” Ranulf observed.

“I have a concern of a more military nature,” Fitzosbern spoke up. “Even if the weather does improve we are left with a considerable obstacle at this time of the year. Should we land successfully in England we will find ourselves in a foreign and undoubtedly hostile land facing the onset of winter. The longer we are delayed the closer we come to finding ourselves in a situation where only the food that we can carry across the sea in our ships will keep body and soul together. The Saxons for their part will have their bumper harvest to see them through to spring and will, I do not doubt, come at us all the stronger for it.”

“Our wooden castles will prove of little comfort in a hostile land when winter tightens its grip and the food runs low.” Another agreed.

“Our strategy is to provoke a response from Harold Godwinson as soon as we land,” the duke told them. “You are right Fitzosbern; the time we have lost here in waiting will count against us once we have landed on the enemy’s shore.”

“Then it seems that we should have a day by which we either leave for England or leave for home?” Ranulf pressed.

“His Grace the Bishop has suggested Michaelmas!”

Odo glanced up the table to his half-brother hoping to express that he had done no such thing by looks alone.

“The twenty-ninth of September? That is but days away,” Robert, Count of Mortain, protested.

“We spent how many days from July to September sat in Dives Sur Mer, and then again here?” Ranulf countered.

“Enough.” Guillaume raised his voice at last.

The room fell instantly silent, only the logs on the fire made a noise as they burnt in the grate. He let the silence remain for a long time as he stared hard into all of the faces gathered around the table. It was indeed time to exert his ducal authority.

“There are many valid concerns that beset us here and I have spent time considering all of them. Michaelmas is too close to bring about an end to these preparations when the winds may yet blow themselves out in a day or two or last a few days longer. I will wait until the end of October for a chance to cross the water, beyond that I dare say that even if we did find a day for safe sailing the Saxons would put out to sea also and threaten our supply line so as to let an English winter thin our numbers.” He looked around the room and noted the suggestions of dismay on several faces. “To keep the men busy I suggest that we practice boarding the ships whenever the winds lessen to make it a task that can be achieved without great risk of loss or damage.”

“And should we land successfully in England what provision will we have to cope with the coldest season?” Ranulf asked in a respectful tone.

“I am not ignorant of the land,” Guillaume replied. “I have been to England previously and I know where I want to be when we do set down our power. There is a town close to the sea and within marching distance of London. London is where King Edward sat his court and where Harold the usurper maintains his. If we are penned in to endure the winter then the town will give us shelter and an opportunity to gain supplies by sea. We will not sit out in the freezing countryside digging for roots waiting for the Saxons to come.”

“I and my priests will pray daily for a change in the weather before Michaelmas,” Odo told them firmly.

“I know that you would have me bend my mind more to your own immediate wishes. I understand the lure of hearth and home at this time of the year, but know also that by bringing

this enterprise to a successful conclusion every man in this room stands to see his wealth and reputation increase in proportion to the energy he exercises in our design. If you can find nothing else to occupy your minds while we wait upon the weather then think of how rich your lands will be in both Normandy and England, and how much poorer will be those who spurned our invitation to press my just claim to a crown stolen by a thief.”

The nobles banged the table but it was not with spontaneous enthusiasm. The duke signalled the servants who brought wine, the council was unofficially ended, the duke deciding to leave matters whilst the barons’ spirits were seemingly high. Robert left his seat and joined Guillaume and Odo near the great stone hearth.

“Well spoken,” he told his brother.

“It was nothing that they have not heard previously.” Guillaume did not smile. He looked into the fire with eyes full of concern. “They are being drawn taught like the cables on a ship’s mast, like a master-mariner I must judge the right moment to come about before they snap.”

“They will hold,” Odo insisted.

“The desertions will begin soon,” Guillaume told them, “amongst the mercenaries first I believe but once it starts it will travel through the ranks like the pox. Desertion will injure us more surely than any Saxon arms.”

“If any of the barons dares to break ranks...” Robert let the rest of his thought go unspoken, they already knew the consequences.

“There is little more that can be done other than to trust to divine providence,” Odo observed.

Guillaume glanced at his brother with barely hidden disdain. He never trusted to providence.

“I trust only to the strength of our arms in this matter,” he asserted.

“Whether arms or providence one thing is clear, we remain dependent on that over which we have no influence.” Robert commented. “We must while away another evening listening to the storm winds outside whilst the Saxons repose themselves in comfort and have little need to go out of doors.”