

St Valéry-sur-Somme

The sun was setting now, cloaked in thin clouds. A fine day was coming to an end. With his two brothers Guillaume rode through the camp and acknowledged the soldiers and their captains as he wended his way down to the shore. The flags and pennants of the army moved easily in the lighter wind that now caressed them, giving colour to the landscape. The camp had a much more positive atmosphere about it. The men were busy and glad to be so after so many weeks of indolence. The noises that they gave rise to were more welcome to the ear of the duke than the complaints raised over the past weeks.

“It seems that all are in agreement with your command to move to England,” Robert, the Count of Mortain, observed. “Bored soldiers quickly become lawless, as we have seen, but all that seems forgotten now.”

“I marvel that this scene of activity can be called anything but chaotic,” Bishop Odo added. “There is so much going on and yet with such a lack of order or organisation.”

“They have practised this loading and unloading of the ships many times now,” Guillaume reminded his brother, “it is the one thing that we can trust them to do with little in the way of mishap.”

Down at the shore they could see the many ships of the fleet, sitting comfortably upon the now gentle waters out in the harbour, waiting to accept the army. Most of the equipment of war, the weapons and armour, the arrows and shields, the wooden walls for the fort that would be built in sections, had been stored away for many weeks, but the men and the horses could not be treated in such a fashion. The soldiers were easy to transport of course, they simply climbed into the smaller boats that took them out to their assigned ships; the horses were another matter.

Close by lay a boat with a long wide plank up which blindfolded horses were being led one at a time. The men were soft spoken, trying to keep the animals calm. They had already loaded several boats previously and were currently leading the first animal to occupy this particular vessel. The horse seemed skittish, however, and slipped its blindfold as it stepped into the boat. Panicking the animal proceeded to knock most of the crew overboard before it leapt into the surf itself. The remaining

men jumped into the water to recapture the animal, it was a scene that some found amusing.

"Mayhap we should leave the horses here and do like the Vikings do when they raid England, hope to find suitable mounts in the Saxon coastal settlements?" Odo wondered.

"We can do no such thing," Robert told him, "we need the horses."

"It is the knights that need the horses," Guillaume added. "The Saxons do not fight on horseback; they do not train their beasts to war."

"Their army is of peasant stock," Odo insisted, expressing the generally held view of the Norman barons.

"Odo, as a bishop you have your offices but when it comes to war let me and Robert deal with such matters," Guillaume answered him.

"It is as dangerous to underestimate an enemy as it is to ride to the list without all of one's armour," Robert agreed. "The Saxons have fine spearmen, they know how to fight with the sword and the axe, their knives are long and sharp, but they do not have our mounted knights. To have any impact upon the stout shield-wall of the Saxons we need the long reaching spears of the barons on horseback; we must take the horses."

"As you say, I have my offices and glad am I that it does not include caring for these beasts when it comes to taking them on board our ships," Odo said with a smile. "I leave you here brothers, my ship is further on I believe, I will sail with my priests and the accoutrements of my holy office; fare thee well!"

"Fare thee well brother", Guillaume and Robert returned.

"Do you wish me to board with you?" Robert asked.

"No but thanks for thy concern," Guillaume replied with an honest smile. "I will sail the Mora alone tonight, you have much to do with getting your own people aboard as it is."

"Unlike some of the barons I have men of ability that I trust to do their duty, nevertheless, I suppose that it will not hurt to show my face to them once in awhile," Robert returned with a grin. "Good sailing brother, I will see thee next in England."

They gripped forearms, each looking into the others face, and then Robert turned his horse away and started up the beach looking for his banner that marked where his contingent would be loading to reach their ships.

The Duke of Normandy dismounted and was suddenly consumed with a wash of contradictory emotions. The moment that his brothers departed he missed their

presence and he even thought of having them called back but then checked himself. It was, he told himself, just that in the many weeks of frustration he had become used to them being at hand. He needed time now to be alone and to think on what tomorrow might bring them. Besides, it would only be for a few short hours and both Odo and Robert had much to do no matter how the Count of Mortain made light of his work.

A soldier led the Duke's horse away as he made his way to a small boat that was gently rocked by the swell. He was alone now with the four oarsmen who bent their backs to the task of rowing against the tide to take him out to his ship. Now that he was truly alone doubt gnawed at Guillaume.

Everything settled on a single throw of the dice, how would the numbers fall?

In Harold Godwinson he knew that he had a capable enemy. In the Saxon army he knew that he had a formidable opponent to overcome. The land was hostile and largely unknown to them. The sea-crossing was dangerous and both ships and men would surely be lost.

We play now for high stakes and for all my planning, for all my diplomacy, now comes the moment when everything is hazarded on a whim of fate, what will my fate be?

The Mora came into view and Guillaume found his heart lightening at the sight of her. She did not look particularly different to the other large vessels in the fleet in terms of shape and form, the Nordic influence in design being just as strong as with all the other ships. The Mora was special to Guillaume, however, because it was a gift from his wife Matilda. As the small boat made its way through the fleet Guillaume simply occupied himself with watching his ship come nearer and thinking now about Matilda herself.

He knew, of course, about the jokes made at their expense. She was barely taller than four foot and there had been rumours put about that they were too closely related to be married. The condemnation of Rome had not helped in the matter but in truth they were only rumours, the real motivation was, as ever, political. Matilda's father was Baldwin V, Count of Flanders, and he was not known to be a supporter of Rome. Curious, also, that Matilda's aunt should be married to Tostig Godwinson, the younger brother of Harold Godwinson.

Marriage was as much a political act as a declaration of an alliance or of going to war. However, Guillaume had a genuine fondness for Matilda. She was a fine woman in her own right, intelligent, and devoted enough to know how to use her wealth to aid

her husband's ambitions. Indeed, in this respect she was the perfect wife, having abandoned all sympathy for Flanders and replaced it with a concern only for the Duchy of Normandy.

Perhaps Rome had a valid reason to fear their marriage in consideration of the strength that Normandy had grown to whereas France had shrunk in comparison?

Guillaume found solace in his religion but he sometimes bordered on contempt for the priests. Nevertheless, they had their uses. Pope Alexander had given him a papal standard and excommunicated Harold from the church in support of Guillaume's claim to the English crown. He had a visible right on his side, whereas the Saxon had nothing but his own rashness.

And where would Harold be now? In his court at King Edward's palace of Westminster? In London overlooking the defences of his stolen crown?

The latest reports were days old but they spoke of the Saxon King leading his army north. Guillaume had thought long and hard on what might cause Harold to desert the south of England, if the reports were true. Once again the name of Tostig Godwinson came back to his mind. He knew that the exiled former Eorl of Northumbria had harried the eastern coast of England earlier in the year, he knew also from his own audience with Tostig that Harold's brother was intent upon revenge.

Where could such a man gather an army large enough to invade England with?

Was this a ruse to encourage him to board his Norman army and sail into a trap?

Was Harold looking to decide the contest by leaving the south of England seemingly open to invasion?

Would winter crush his army in its hoary grasp long before the Saxons took to the field of battle?

The boat pulled alongside the Mora and Guillaume boarded her with a little help from some of the sailors. A tent had been erected on the raised deck near the stern and he immediately intended to retire to enjoy the privacy that it offered. More importantly he wanted to consider the tactics that they would use in order to defeat Harold and his Saxon army once they had established themselves on English soil.

"My Lord!" a man stepped forward as he spoke.

Guillaume glanced at him without recognising the man. He motioned to one of his officers and made a point of speaking to him rather than the stranger.

“Who is this?” The Duke’s tone was harsh, he did not like the idea of being of being accosted upon his own ship by someone who had not been introduced to him.

The Norman officer looked at the man indicated and then took a step closer towards his lord. He leaned closer so as not to be overheard.

“His name is Ewart, he says that he comes from England with news most confidential concerning the movement of Harold Godwinson.”

“He only says as much?” There was a tone of disbelief in the duke’s voice.

“My Lord, he carries a pass from the Sergeant-at-Arms.” The officer declared.

“Your name is Ewart?” Guillaume turned to the man. He noted that there was little that was notable about his appearance. He had black hair cut short, a trimmed beard, and a wide forehead. His clothing was equally unremarkable.

“Indeed, My Lord.” He bowed respectfully.

“And you come from England?”

“I took a letter there, My Lord. I was to ensure that it reached Westminster,” Ewart explained with a sincere expression.

“So you are not a Saxon then?”

“Indeed not, My Lord!” Ewart now looked offended.

“The Saxons did not trouble you?”

“Nay, My Lord. On occasion I encountered some unfriendliness, they are not over keen on strangers, but in the most part I was left to get on with my journey.”

“How did you come by this commission of carrying a letter to the court of the King of England?” Guillaume was minded of the letter that he had asked Wulfnoth Godwinson to write to his elder brother urging him to make peace and surrender the throne to the duke.

“It was entrusted to me by my own lord, Goubert d'Auffay.”

“Seigneur of Auffay?”

“The same, My Lord.”

“And where did he get this commission, for surely he was not writing to the usurper of England on his own merit?”

“I know not, My Lord, I am but a servant and do my lord’s bidding. He told me to take the letter to England, gave me a purse of coins, and directed me to a fishing boat that took me over the sea. I had directions to Westminster and enough English words in my tongue to find my way there and back again.”

“And now you come to me, for what purpose?”

"I learnt of something that I thought would be of interest to you, My Lord, concerning the movements of Harold Godwinson; he is not in London at the moment." Ewart spoke the last somewhat dramatically.

"You told this to your lord, Goubert d'Auffay?"

"Not yet, My Lord, it seemed meet to come direct to yourself as I thought that this information would be of use to you."

"You lie!" Guillaume spoke calmly but looked Ewart directly in the face.

"My Lord...?" In return a shadow of confusion crossed over the man's face.

"You have not set foot in England nor carried a letter. I believe that you are a Breton spy."

"No My Lord!" Ewart raised his voice in appeal while his left hand slipped inside his tunic. He stepped closer to the duke. "I speak the truth, I have word on Harold Godwinson."

"Mayhap you do but you have already given me too much information; Goubert d'Auffay was not tasked with sending a letter to Godwinson. He is not your lord!"

Ewart sprang with incredible speed, a sliver of steel flashing in his left fist. Guillaume responded by taking a step backwards while sending his left hand out to catch the other's right forearm and close on it tightly. He turned quickly to his left and pulled hard. Ewart staggered and lost his balance, finding himself propelled towards the duke in an uncontrolled manner. Something sharp and cold pierced his stomach as he came up short against the body of Guillaume.

The attack was over in a split second and the crewmen had had no time in which to respond. Guillaume looked into the face of Ewart, his eyes cold and hard. The man said nothing as life slipped from his grasp and he slowly fell to the boards of the ship.

"My Lord!" the Norman officer at last reacted, unnecessarily drawing his sword and leaping towards the now prone form of Ewart.

"It would seem that assassins can draw passes from the Sergeant at Arms," Guillaume commented dryly. "You are responsible for my safety are you not?"

"Yes, My Lord." The man looked crestfallen.

Guillaume raised his right hand and looked at the blood that ran freely down the dagger that he held in it.

"I place more faith in this. Get rid of this Breton filth and clean his blood off of my ship. I will retire, ensure that no one else disturbs my peace!" Duke Guillaume

commanded angrily. With that he proceeded to his tent and closed the canvas flap behind him.