

CHAPTER ONE



THE NORMAN/FRENCH BORDER 1033

William de Hauteville could smell their destination a long time before it came into view, though he was at a loss to fully explain it. He pushed himself up on his stirrups to better test the air, away from the odour of his own sweating mount. The familiar stink of dung and horse piss was there, that mingled with woodsmoke and the strong odour of roasting meat, yet paramount was a powerful latrine smell that was damned unpleasant.

‘That, boy,’ growled his father, when he called ahead to ask for explanation, ‘is the smell of an army too long in one place.’

Tancred de Hauteville had taken part in many a campaign in his forty years, so it was, to him, familiar – the stench of too many fighting men and their animals in too confined a space. It would be strange to all his sons

and the companions of like age who rode with them – they had never seen or been part of a host of the size gathering in the Norman borderlands of the Vexin, a ducal army gathered in one place, preparing for battle. Suddenly Tancred pulled up his mount, hauling the head round to face those following.

‘Remember what I have said,’ he barked. ‘Behave yourselves.’

Forced to halt their own horses, the half of the party not of his blood nodded attentively, for he was their lord and master. His sons, a half-dozen in number, regardless of age, adopted the blank expression of those hearing a familiar parental admonishment, delivered too often.

‘None of your pranks and japes,’ their father continued; he knew his sons to be much given to mischief. ‘You will be among grown men, fighting men, quick to the knife and careful of their honour, who will not take kindly to your stupid jests. Do you heed what I say?’ The last words being shouted demanded an eager response, albeit a false one in the family members. ‘William, I look to you in this.’

‘Yes, Father,’ William replied, with the weary sigh of an elder brother often employed as a surrogate parent.

‘Now hold your heads up high,’ Tancred concluded, as he turned his horse again and kicked it into a trot. ‘Let them know you are of the house of de Hauteville.’

That did produce a common response, for if these young men were proud of anything, it was their bloodline.

Having passed the picket set to ensure the encampment was not pilfered, the band stopped at the top of the rise overlooking the assembled force. The River Seine, a supply lifeline their duke would hug as long as possible, ran twisted and silver along the floor of the valley to where it was joined by the tributary of the Epte, hard by the hamlet of Giverny; here the land of the Normans bordered that of the Capetian Franks.

The north bank was now bare of the trees that had been cut down for firewood, which also allowed clear passage for the hundreds of horses to be brought, in turns, to drink their fill. Boats, some empty, others still laden with wheat, meat, hay and oats, were drawn up on another stretch of cleared riverbank with labouring serfs toiling to unload them. On the mound that overlooked the encampment stood the large double pavilion of their liege lord, the commander of this force, Robert, Duke of Normandy, armorial pennants fluttering from each corner, knights of his familia, in full mail and helmets, in plain view standing guard at the entrance where hung the tasselled gonfalon denoting the ducal title.

‘Christ in heaven!’ cried William as he took in the size of what lay before them.

Tancred looked askance at that exclamation, which bordered on blasphemy, not something of which he was tolerant. His children transgressed in that area often – as they did in many other ways – and just as often he was obliged to box their ears. Yet he let it pass this once; had

he not himself felt much the same when he first became part of such a multitude and very much around the same age serving the present duke's father? Then he had fought against the Capetian Franks, the very people to whom the Norman host was about to be allied.

In a blink, Tancred was back in his own youth, stirrup to stirrup with his own father, his uncle of Montbray on his other side, part of a line of Norman cavalry, ahead of them a Frankish host, their shields and fighting metal glinting in a low dawn sun. He could recall clearly the mixture of thrill and fear, the need to avoid the kind of fidget that would alert his elders to his anxieties, the snorts and tossing heads of the horses, the pennants on the lances of those leading the attack fluttering in a zephyr of a breeze.

The shouted command came eventually to have the horses move forward, slowly, holding their line, the point at which the command came to break into a trot that signified the commitment to the attack, followed by the sense of the world narrowing down to that which lay right before you and immediately to left and right, his father raising his lance for jabbing or throwing and he doing likewise, the line of shields which looked like an unbreakable wall coming closer and closer. But break it did, faced with the charging horses of the finest mounted warriors in the known world.

'I have never seen such a sight, Father!'

Those words brought Tancred back to the present, and to the knowledge that, with God's Good Grace, his sons

would ride with him in a like contest and win their spurs, as would his vassals, who included his fiery Montbray nephew, a doughty and eager fighter, even if the lad was an ordained priest.

‘None of you have, but perhaps if chance favours you, you will see it often.’

Serlo and Robert, mere boys, along as squires to their elder siblings, had kicked their donkeys to get alongside him, eager for explanation. Their brothers shared the curiosity, but affected an air of indifference, which they thought befitted their greater age, causing their father to smile at their posturing, given they were just either side of eighteen. With pointed finger, and in a voice that was inclusive to all, he identified the ducal pavilion, as well as the lesser posts of the Constable and the Master Marshall, set slightly lower on the slope.

From there to near the riverbank stood the various contingents who had set out their fire pits and cloak-covered bedding around the small round tents of the lords to whom they were vassals. Close to the water’s edge and in the shade of some still-standing oaks, the blacksmith had set up a temporary forge, fire aglow, his hammer already employed. Likewise the armourer was at work with his vice and stone wheel, sparks flying as swords were sharpened, pommels roped with twine and hand guards bent in sword practice made square. Next to him the saddler toiled on the stout, newly constructed, rough wood bench, on which he would carry out repairs to harness and saddles.

‘The de Montfort pennant, Father,’ exclaimed Drogo, son number two, pointing to a far-off flag close to the river.

‘I see it, boy, but I think as cousins and relations to our Lord Duke we can present ourselves there first.’

‘Which will not please the Sire de Montfort,’ Drogo responded, with the kind of smirk that indicated the certainty that the response would be angry; he was not disappointed.

‘No, it will not,’ Tancred snapped, adding a touch of hypocrisy in the blasphemy line, ‘but he can go to the Devil.’

Unseen by his father, Drogo exchanged an amused glance with William who, too close to the parental temper, could not respond. Count Evro de Montfort, richer by far in both land and goods, and their nearest powerful neighbour, claimed that the de Hautevilles were vassals to him. Tancred was adamant that he held his demesne and title direct from the duke; mention of the de Montfort claim was one sure way for his sons to rile him, though not the only one, given he had a touchy nature.

Spurring his mount, Tancred led his party along the ridge, turning inwards when they were abreast of the ducal pavilion to ride between squatting groups of the duke’s own knights, few of whom spared them a glance. He dismounted by the large open flap at the front, followed by his sons. The other six lances did likewise, but they knew their duty: they would stay with the animals until their master had completed his business.

‘Tancred, Lord of Hauteville, with his sons, to see his cousin, Duke Robert.’

One of the familia knights standing guard turned a head to look at him, eyes at either side of his nose guard showing no sign of welcome. The man before him had shouted that request, clearly desiring to be heard inside the canvas, in the forepart of the double pavilion, where the scribes laboured and the servants toiled. One of them would certainly scurry through to the duke’s quarters to tell him who sought audience, and if this grizzled fellow was a relative it was unlikely he could be denied.

Habit dictates that no fighting man can be in proximity to another without assessment. Before Tancred stood a fellow of a height not much less than his own, in mailed hauberk and a helmet bearing the colours of his duke, hands resting on the long sword centred before him, the point in the ground. As a familia knight he was part of the personal contingent of warriors who would fight alongside their Lord and, if necessary, die to protect him. From what could be seen of his face it was lean and hard, his body too, as befitted his station and duty.

The summing up of the supplicant Lord of Hauteville started with the grey hair, tinged at the tip with a residue of the golden colour it had once been. The ruddy, weather-beaten face, much lined, showed numerous scars that looked as though they might come from hard warfare, wounds to cheek as well as one dent to skin and bone that had been inflicted under the line where a helmet would be

worn. The blue eyes were as hard as the jaw was firm, and as if to add to the feeling of hazard that emanated from this old man, two of those sons who stood immediately behind him helped form a trinity of impressive size and girth, for both exceeded him in height.

The hurrying figure that emerged from the gloom of the tent had the hunched body, tonsured head and ink-stained fingers of a monkish scribe, and his voice, when he spoke, was silky enough to match his appearance. 'His Grace, the noble Duke Robert, will receive you.'

'Good.' Tancred turned to his two eldest sons and said softly, 'He knows I would wait till Doomsday if he refused.'

'But he bids your sons wait outside,' the monk added.

'Nonsense,' Tancred snarled, 'they are his blood relations.'

As Tancred moved forward, indicating that his offspring should follow, there was a visible twitch in the shoulders of the guard, as if he was about to intervene, but the older man had already passed by and, faced with William and Drogo de Hauteville, that gave him pause. The two that followed were younger but well on the way to sharing the looks as well as the imposing build: even the boys that brought up the rear, hands firmly grasping the knives at their waist to go with an arrogant stare, had a lot of height for what looked like tender years. Their father led the way past the open mouth of the silently protesting monk and made straight for the inner sanctum that lay through a second open flap.

The voice, strong and irritated, spoke before the eyes of any of those just entered had adjusted enough to identify this liege lord or any of the numerous folk attending upon him, all stood in silhouette against the strong sunlight shining through the rolled-up rear canvas of the pavilion.

‘I said your sons were to stay outside.’

‘You would not slight your nephews, cousin?’

Tall enough to look over his father’s head, as his eyes adjusted, William saw the speaker was a man of decent height, though less than his own, fair of hair and beard, and richly clad in bright mail covered by a fine red surcoat bearing the ducal device of his two golden and recumbent lions.

Those attending him varied from a hunchbacked fellow who looked like a jester, a clutch of richly clad knights in fine garb, to a stout man in the clothing of a high-ranking prelate. But they all shared one thing, a look of plain distaste at this intrusion by a bunch of sweat-stained, leather jerkin-wearing ruffians. To each and every one, as he took up station alongside his father, William gave an engaging smile.

‘Cousin?’ the duke replied, in a piqued voice, looking Tancred up and down, taking in that he alone was wearing mail and a surcoat, albeit a threadbare overgarment that had seen many better days. ‘Do you not find that to be an outmoded form of address with which to approach your liege lord?’

‘We share a great ancestor in Count Rollo, sire, do we not?’

‘Of such long standing that it is no longer appropriate. The consanguinity has lapsed, Tancred. Count Rollo has been dead near a hundred years.’

‘But he is well remembered in my humble demesne, as are his deeds. I tell my sons of them often. However, if it displeases you I shall be content to address you as brother-in-law.’

‘To a half-sister fourteen years deceased?’

The tone of Tancred’s voice, which had been playful, hardened immediately, and William, the only one who could observe any part of his features, saw his jaw tense. ‘She lives on in her sons. To slight them is to slight her memory.’

Duke Robert’s face showed the frustration such a reminder had engendered, which clearly pleased Tancred, who had regaled his offspring more than they cared to hear of how he had known this man since he was a mewling child, had even held him as a baby, chucked his cheeks as a boy and playfully fought with him as he grew up. He had related to the youthful Robert and his elder brother Richard the great Norse sagas that he had learnt at his own grandfather’s knee. There had been a time, Tancred informed them all, when what shone from those deep-set green eyes was respect for a noted warrior. It was plain to William – if that esteem had ever existed – it was now no more.

His father saw the same lack: Robert, Duke of Normandy, who these days liked to be called the Magnificent, was

probably unaccustomed now to anything other than flattery and agreement, so malleable, so Frankish, to Tancred's way of thinking, had his court become. The older man came from a generation that did not fear to tell a liege lord to his face that he was in error. His own father had spoken to the late Count Richard, even after he had elevated himself into a duke, as an equal, never forgetting their shared heritage as Viking warriors and the rights that went with it; there could be no vassalage that did not rest on respect.

The duke was now looking beyond Tancred at this troop of sons: he would be aware there were even more of this tribe back in the Contentin, another five boys and a trio of daughters. Truly their father had the loins of a goat, and had found both in his late half-sister and his second wife a fecundity to match his carnal exertions: the only years in which his wives had not been brought to bed with child had been those when he was away fighting.

The one standing next to Tancred, who would be the eldest, was damned impressive, taller by half a hand than his father and his other brothers, with a look in his eye and a lazy smile that was not one that could be associated with respect. If anything he looked amused, as if what was happening bordered on an absurdity that might at any moment cause him to laugh out loud.

'Name them to me,' he said, relenting.

Tancred named William as his heir, then brought the others forward one by one and by age, each to execute an awkward bow that would not be seen as too obsequious.

‘Drogo, Humphrey, Geoffrey, your sister’s youngest Serlo and, though not a true nephew, my first born by my second wife, whom I named after you.’

That obliged the duke to fix his namesake, and call the thirteen-year-old Robert de Hauteville forward. What he saw was as affecting to the eye as the sight of his brothers, for his namesake was big for his age, even bigger than the year-older Serlo, and that boy was no dwarf: Tancred bred sturdy sons.

‘It is a good name, Robert; wear it well, boy, in respect for me.’

The voice that responded was newly broken and slightly rasping. ‘I shall endeavour to do so, sire, upon my honour.’

‘Now that I have named my sons,’ said Tancred, ‘and they have seen the duke they are eager to serve, I would ask to speak with you in private.’

‘On the matter of?’

‘That which I have sent word to you before, the obligations of family.’

The pause was long, the silence of it oppressive, as the two men, liege lord and vassal, locked eyes, both seeking to hide a deep and mutual repugnance. To the duke, who clearly now forgot how he had enjoyed listening to those tales of heroism and fickle Norse gods, Tancred, with his nostalgic adherence to the old ways, represented a relic of a bygone age and was given to haughtiness with it. The Normans were no more Viking now than those indigenes of the Neustrian March whom they had conquered,

intermingled with and married, no more Norsemen than the Angevins, Carolingian Franks or Bretons whose lands neighboured his. The older man lived in a dead past and had no gaze for a different future.

‘Your late brother was aware of such an obligation, my Lord.’

The sudden rigidity of the duke’s bearing was evidence enough of the way he took that last remark; his dead brother was a subject no one in his entourage dared to mention, and few outside that circle, even his most powerful vassals, would do so either, likely as it was to produce a towering rage. The accusation was that Robert had murdered, in fact poisoned, his elder brother Richard, to gain the dukedom, hence the other name by which he was called, albeit out of his hearing: not Robert the Magnificent, but Robert the Devil.

The men around him, courtiers all, waited for the eruption, but they waited in vain, though a sharp eye would have detected the effort involved in containing it.

‘Leave us,’ Robert commanded, standing stock-still until the pavilion had emptied of courtiers. ‘Your brood too, Tancred.’

Tancred laid a hand on William’s arm. ‘I ask that my heir be allowed to stay.’

‘He may if he undertakes to remain silent. I am not given to discoursing with boys.’

William knew those words were meant to anger and diminish him; he had in his own mind long ceased to be

a boy by many years, so the amused expression he wore broke immediately into a full smile which, gratifyingly, seemed to nonplus the speaker.

‘The rest of you, leave us,’ said Tancred.

They obeyed, but the last sound Tancred heard was of Serlo de Hauteville mimicking his younger half-brother, his voice high and mocking. ‘I’ll endeavour to do so, sire, upon my honour. Shall I lick your arse, sire?’ That was followed by the sound of a scuffle, then the bellowing voice of Drogo.

‘Stop scrapping, you two, or I’ll sling you both in the river.’

‘An unruly lot, your sons,’ the duke said softly. Then he wrinkled his nose, for they had left behind them a strong odour of unwashed travel. ‘Rustic too.’

‘They are fighters, sire, as I have raised them to be and they have proved their worth many times against any who would trouble my lands. They ride well, handle both sword and lance as they should. Manners, if you think it something they lack, can be acquired.’

Duke Robert was looking at William as he replied. ‘And what is it that you want for them?’

‘If I mention your late brother, sire, I do so out of the respect I had for him.’

The response came as a hiss. ‘My relationship was more of the kind we have just overheard outside this tent.’

‘It was always understood that when my boys came of age, they would become part of his familia and serve him

as knights of his body. That he died before that came to pass...'

The interruption was sharp. 'I know from your repeated correspondence you would like me to do the same!'

'They are your blood relatives and would serve you well.'

'You have great faith, Tancred, in the connection wished upon us by blood.'

'To me it is a sacred bond which surpasses all others, outside the grace of God.'

'Not a view with which I agree. Why are we here gathered on this riverbank, if not to support one brother, the King of the Franks, against another, not to mention the King's own mother who sees the wrong one of her sons as the ruler of Paris?'

There was bitterness in that last part: Robert's own mother was not fond of him.

'The Franks do not share our ways,' protested Tancred.

The reply was almost weary. 'Your ways, Tancred, and long gone they are. I doubt even your own sons share them.'

'They would never fight each other!'

'Are my ears mistaken? Did I not just hear that very thing.'

'I mean with weapons. William here would tell you no different. Certainly they come to blows and will wrestle, what brood does not, but no son of mine will ever raise a sword against his own brother. To do so is to invite the mark of Cain.'

The duke looked as if he had been slapped, but William also detected his determination to avoid a loss of control. ‘On pain of your wrath?’

‘Yes.’

‘You will die one day, Tancred, and then maybe your wrath will be meaningless.’

‘God’s forgiveness will still be necessary.’

‘God,’ Duke Robert said, almost sighing. ‘There are ways to gain his forgiveness.’

William felt his father’s hand on his shoulder. ‘I wish you to take them into your familia. Let them serve close to you and prove their worth. I count each one of my children as a blessing, but my patrimony is too small to support them all. Let them win both their spurs and some reward in your service, let them earn their own demesne from you.’

William de Hauteville knew that the duke was going to refuse, even though he did not speak: it was in his eyes and the ghost of a smirk that made the corners of his lips twitch.

‘Perhaps they may come into more than that,’ the older man said, which made his son suspect he had come to the same conclusion.

‘More?’

‘William, leave us,’ Tancred said. ‘What I have to say now is not for your ears.’

‘Father,’ William replied, executing a slight bow. Once he had gone Tancred spoke softly. ‘You are unwed and childless, sire...’

For the first time Robert of Normandy really raised his voice. 'I have a son and a daughter.'

'Born out of wedlock.'

'As was your late wife,' the duke snapped.

'Your brother died without issue, which places my eldest son, William, your nephew, as one of your near blood relatives.'

'There are others, not least the child of my father's sister.'

'Edward of England, that milksop! He is a man who fights on his knees. I fought on behalf of his father and he was a dolt. If you have family around you, at least have those with warrior blood, men who do not fear to lay down their lives.'

'Do you think me a fool, Tancred?' Robert asked softly.

The negative shake of the head he got in reply lacked conviction.

'My own William, not yours, is my nearest blood relative, and given the love I have for him, I would not surround him with a tribe who might see, as blood relations, advantage in doing him harm. Do you really think I am mad enough to invite into my household your brood, all of whom, no doubt, thanks to your prattling, think they have some right to my title?'

'Marry, have sons. Mine do not seek your title, they seek your respect.'

'Even if I do marry, I would name William as my heir.'

'Then stay alive, Robert,' Tancred growled, 'for there

will be men in the hundreds who seek to do him harm, men to whom your dukedom is a glittering prize, though I swear on the grave of your sister not one of them will bear my name. I see the men you consort with and I can smell their measure. You surround yourself with silken tongues and see loyalty where there is only self-interest. The men you asked to leave our presence will not dare dispute with you, as I will and as they should, but this I will tell you straight. They are not going to respect a bastard boy regardless of how much you love him.'

'Dispute with me! What has a bare-arsed baron from the Contentin got to tell me that I should take heed of?'

'This bare-arsed baron has fought the Franks, the English and the Moors and he would tell you this campaign on which you are engaged is folly. A new Capetian King mounts his throne in Paris and his brother disputes his right? He calls on you to aid him and you oblige, and that is an error. We should let these Frankish brothers fight each other as much as they wish, for there is more advantage in that than there is in aiding one against the other.'

'You know nothing, old man.'

'I know your father would have stood aside. No doubt you have received promises of reward, of land and castles, but they are only as good as the strength you can put in the field in the years to come. Let your Frankish King Henry become powerful enough, which he will surely do with no one to contain him, and he will take them back and more besides.'

‘Yet you came to fight?’

‘It is moneyed service. The King of the Franks will pay for every lance you put in the field and I have mouths to feed, but I would gladly forgo it to let the Capets stew in their own fratricidal juice.’

Like a bursting damn the fury of the Duke spilt over, and he shouted in a voice that no canvas would contain, so loud that it was very likely audible on the bank of the Seine.

‘I think you came to beard me, Tancred, not for the silver you will be paid. You ask that I respect your sons? Well I will do so by not having you and them slung into the pit of the nearest donjon. I will do so by letting you join the battaile of the Sire de Montfort, as I say you are obliged to do, even if you dispute it. But when we fight, if we fight, make sure you are not in my sight when it is over, for I may forget that you married my sister, forget that you loyally served my father, and have that head of yours off your shoulders and, to protect myself and mine own from vengeance, take those of your sons as well down to the youngest babe in arms, as well as rip out anything carried in the womb of your wife. Now get out.’

‘Sire.’