

CHAPTER ONE



Robert *Guiscard*, Count of Apulia, knew that the enemy commander, Argyrus, would be obliged to sortie out at some time: it was his only hope of raising a siege now approaching a year in duration. Brindisi had stout walls that had withstood much in the way of ballista, and many hands to repair any breeches made by the huge, flying stones, so that all his assaults had failed to get the besieging army into the great port city, one of the last of the Byzantine bastions left in Southern Italy; in a lightning sweep the previous year he had taken the other cities of Apulia and Eastern Calabria, leaving the two greatest outposts, Brindisi and the even more formidable Bari, isolated.

But those numerous hands repairing broken stone needed to be fed and the siege had cut off any hope of

forage from the surrounding countryside, while hired Venetian galleys blocked off any supplies from the sea. Populous and crowded, Brindisi would be fast approaching the point of mass starvation: the moat and the harbour that bordered the city were already filling up with the bloated, decaying cadavers of the weakest inhabitants: the elderly, the sick and children.

There is a point in an invested city where a good commander must decide whether to feed his horses – necessary for a sortie – or eat them, then distribute the oats needed to keep them healthy to the starving inhabitants: Argyrus was at that point. Delay too long and there was a risk that the citizens, driven by fear and hunger, at a time when there were no more dogs, cats or rats to eat, would take matters into their own hands. Many a leader had waited too long and found himself overthrown, forced to flee or even murdered by those he was tasked to defend, thrown as a corpse from his own walls before the gates were opened to surrender the city.

‘I need news,’ Argyrus insisted. ‘I need to know if any of my stratagems are bearing fruit.’

The men to whom he spoke – his senior subordinates – were also aware of the approaching crisis: they also knew they needed to appear confident before their commander, lest by an expression of doubt they forfeit their own lives, this necessary to destroy any hint of defeatism in the higher echelons of the defence. Argyrus was a man much

dependent on spies – he had his informants in the city, some in the *Guiscard's* camp, yet others dotted around the provinces seeking to stir up trouble in the Norman rear, acting either for gain or from conviction – but getting in and out of the city was difficult: his messengers were being intercepted too easily.

‘We will be gifted but one opportunity, so we must make sure it is final in its outcome.’

‘We could offer to buy him off, My Lord. Normans are always grasping for gold.’

‘Not the one outside our walls! The *Guiscard* seeks power and will not be content with Brindisi. He will have Bari as well if he can. If the imperial court would realise that they would have reinforced me long ago, but there are more fools in Constantinople than wise heads.’

No one would meet the Catapan’s eye then: it was not a good idea to question the decisions of the emperor or those who advised him; the dungeons of Constantinople were brimming with those who had dared, no doubt betrayed, as they would be now, by those they trusted. Argyrus had, like his predecessors, never had enough troops to beat the increasing power of the Normans, yet he had kept them at bay for years by intrigue and bribery, provided with gold in abundance. Where that had worked in the past in terms of divide and rule, it was of less use now.

‘One day,’ Argyrus carped, ‘if they are not careful, this count they so disdain will turn up outside their own

walls. He seeks the purple and has too much wealth already to be distracted by more. You do not know these de Hautevilles as I do, for I have been close to them. They are of a different breed to their bandit confrères. I saw in William *Bras de Fer* and his brother Drogo...’

That induced a pause and recollection of another failure: it was by intrigue that Argyrus had ensured both those brothers fell to the secret knife. He had tried to do the same to Robert in the early stages of the siege, only to find the man sent to do murder fired bodily and alive over the city walls – an act he was not meant to, nor did he, survive – leaving the instigator unsure of why the attempt had failed.

‘They are truly a plague. Kill off one and another rises to take his place, each one more dangerous than the last.’

It was gold Argyrus was relying on now, spread about the provinces to foment revolt in the *Guiscard’s* rear. Not all the Normans of Italy were outside his walls or happy with de Hauteville hegemony; not all of Robert’s Apulian subjects were loyal. There were many who might, even if they owed vassalage to the Count of Apulia, see some advantage in revolt. That would draw Robert off and, because he would need to move swiftly, he would have to take with him the men Argyrus feared most, his conroys of mounted Norman warriors, the most feared fighting men in all Christendom.

‘Go out into the city,’ Argyrus commanded. ‘Search for

the hoarding of grain and livestock and seize anything you can find.'

'We have done that once already, Lord Argyrus.' The fellow who spoke, one of his senior captains, got a stare that made him feel cold on what was a hot day. Likewise the voice that responded was icy in tone. 'Do it again, there is always more hidden than you can find in one search. If nothing else, let the citizens see we are not close to capitulation. I need more time.'

Robert de Hauteville knew the Byzantine Catapan had spies in his encampment, just as he was sure it would be necessary to employ guile to draw the fellow out. Never comfortable in siege warfare, no Norman was, he was as eager as the leader of the Greeks to get Argyrus and what forces he could muster out into the open. There, superiority in Norman cavalry would count for more than any static assault by his Italian/Lombard levies. Robert's problem was simple: if he knew that he had the advantage in mounted warfare, so did his opponent. He would not emerge to fight Normans, so some excuse must be manufactured to deceive him, and time was no more on his side than it was on that of Argyrus.

The *Guiscard* had his own problems, common to every siege: the constant need to rotate his soldiers out of the immediate vicinity of the walls to avoid the kind of sickness that would decimate his strength; the requirement to forage in a wider area to provide food

for men and fodder and oats for his horses, without so weakening his force that he handed over advantage to the defenders. He also had a healthy respect for Argyrus: the fellow was a crafty enemy, the first Lombard ever entrusted by Constantinople to hold high office in the fertile south Italian provinces known as the Langobardian Theme. At one time an ally of the Normans and his fellow Lombards, as well as the titular leader of a Lombard-led revolt against Byzantine rule, he had spectacularly betrayed his race and their cause for personal gain, only to be forced to immediately flee for his life.

Many cursed him for this; his present opponent, who had been a witness at the time to his treachery, saw it as sound common sense. More powerful Lombard princes had been using Argyrus as a figurehead who could be discarded once success had been achieved: the man had seen the sense of looking out for himself while the chance still existed to do so. Yet by his act he had done more than let down his fellow Lombards. The amount of distrust his treachery generated allowed William Iron Arm to take leadership of the revolt, turning it from a Lombard insurrection into a Norman bid for territorial gain, one that had been increasingly successful, as first William, then Drogo and the old misery Humphrey, all now gone to meet their Maker, had expanded Norman rule.

Elevated to the office of Catapan, Argyrus had returned to Apulia and proved a thorn ever since, launching plots and strategies to seek to hold back the

Norman tide. Finding their expansion relentless he had even tried an alliance with the papacy, only to see that rebound on him at the decisive Battle of Civitate. On that field the de Hauteville brothers, massively outnumbered, had combined to soundly rout a huge papal army. If there had been genius in the fruits of that victory it had come from Robert, the youngest de Hauteville on the field.

It was he who had seen an opportunity, with the Pope now humiliated, isolated and a Norman prisoner, to turn them from Norman banditti, hated throughout the whole of Italy, into, if not loved overlords, legitimate rulers. With cunning and foresight the *Guiscard* had reasoned that a now defenceless pope, a man with no army who had need of one, had the authority to recognise the titles they had assumed through combat. All they had to do was bow the knee to the man they had defeated and accept him as their suzerain.

In the tangled world in which they lived, a thousand years after the crucifixion, no man could hope to hold a title not given credence by one of the triumvirate of great powers in the Christian world, two temporal, one ecclesiastical: Byzantium, a mortal enemy ripe for dismemberment, was out of the question; the Holy Roman Empire was too Frankish, too disdainful of Norman upstarts, wherever they resided, to reward them with titles unless absolutely obliged to do so. But the papacy, struggling to assert itself and beset by difficulties left over from the time of Charlemagne, had provided the key: the

de Hautevilles, thanks to the Pope and his blessing, now stood as equals to any magnate in Christendom. Robert would thank Argyrus once he was captured, just before he hanged him: after all, he must be made to pay for the murders of William and Drogo.

‘Has he told you everything he knows yet?’ asked Robert, approaching the point where the latest captured messenger seeking a way into Brindisi was slowly spinning, naked, over an open fire pit.

‘All he does is pray to God in his screaming, begging his forgiveness as a miserable sinner.’

‘A true monk, then?’

‘So it seems, My Lord.’

Robert stepped forward to examine the flapping skin, scorched and blackened, that hung from the suspended body, aware of the heightened pork-like smell of his roasting. There was no screaming now, the fellow was long past that, just a low hiss of what he assumed was continued prayer.

‘Such an honest man it would be good to spare, so it is a pity he did not speak. It is rare to meet a monk who is not venal, truly a holy person.’

‘He is too far gone for life, sire.’

‘True,’ Robert replied. ‘Put him out of his misery.’

His back was turned when the fellow’s throat was cut; all he heard was the sound of the heated blood hissing in the coals beneath. He was looking at the walls of Brindisi for the thousandth time, nagged by the thought that he

might be forced to raise the siege. The rate of desertions was rising as levies brought here on the promise of plunder lost any certainty of success. He was also aware of the number of eyes upon him, the glare of attention always afforded to the leader of any warlike enterprise, as men sought in his visage a message of the true state of affairs.

If Robert de Hauteville had a fault – many would maintain he had a raft of them – it was that he was not of a trusting nature. Ready to explain any tactical manoeuvre in battle, or to outline the bones of a campaign, he was very guarded in his thinking on his future plans, so open speculation as to alternatives was never discussed. Those he led were told what they needed to know and nothing more. Right now they would have been amazed to see inside his mind: their general was castigating himself, wondering if he should have let that newly expired messenger through.

Men prepared to die rather than reveal what they know had something to tell: those with nothing of value would speak at the first lick of flame, lie to save their lives, so it would appear the man just roasted had been in possession of useful information. Killing him had only been a mercy inasmuch as he was already too far gone to interrogate and it was quite possible, given he had as many spies in Brindisi as Argyrus had outside the walls, that he would have found out quicker what that was by letting him proceed rather than instructing his

pickets to capture anyone trying to approach the well-defended walls at points where enough destruction had been achieved to allow secret ingress.

Argyrus would want to draw off him and his Norman cavalry; Robert wanted to give the impression of departing without actually doing so, but such a ploy was a tricky thing to manage, given there was not an educated fellow alive unaware of the use of such a tactic since the siege of Troy. He could not go unless his opponent had good cause to believe he was riding to subdue a serious threat and would thus be away for a long time, enough for him to sortie out and inflict a defeat on the remainder of Robert's army. Argyrus was too shrewd: he would not fall for a partial departure; he would have ways of ensuring the Normans were too far off to interfere in his plans.

'Always think your enemy cleverer than you and you will rarely be outfoxed.'

In saying that to himself he was forced to acknowledge the source, his own father Tancred. He recalled how boring he had found the constant repetition of the old man's mantras, usually delivered when he had been drinking. They had never got on and eventually Robert had come to realise that which others had seen more easily: he and Tancred were too much alike to agree on anything. But it would never do to gainsay the old warrior, for his father had seen much and fought in a great many battles. He had campaigned in Normandy, the Frankish kingdoms ruled from Tours and Paris, as

well as in Spain against the Moors. He had even sailed to fight in England to put back on the throne that useless Saxon article, King Ethelred.

‘What would he least expect you to do, this enemy?’ was another of Tancred’s sayings spoken out loud, this as a strong northerly wind, common at this time of year, blew across the siege lines sending up spirals of dust and causing the Venetian galleys to jibe on their anchors.

He fears my Norman cavalry, Robert thought, but he is missing one vital fact. The solution came to him fully formed, as such ideas always do, and so swiftly it was a matter of wonder as to why it had lain dormant so long.

‘My friend,’ he said, quietly addressing a distant enemy, ‘you forget, Normans are warriors first and cavalry second.’

Before he had finished that softly uttered statement he was striding towards his tent, shouting for the people he needed, underlings who gathered quickly to hear what their general had to impart. Suspicious as ever, unsure of who was taking Byzantine gold, he felt the need to concoct a story, to say that roasted emissary had betrayed a secret, indeed to make up the kind of revolt Argyrus had been so assiduous in trying to foment, before giving orders for his Norman captains to prepare their *batailles* for an immediate departure, not forgetting to sanction the use of the entire stud of spare mounts.

‘There is trouble in Trani, a serious uprising, and we

must move with maximum speed, so there is no time to favour our mounts. We must push them hard, not only on the way there, but back as well, lest Argyrus sees a chance to come out and fight.'

'Trani was ever too Greek a city, second only to Bari. We should have torn down their walls when we had the chance.'

These words were uttered by Geoffrey, his older brother, though with a twinkle in his eye: he knew Robert too well to be entirely fooled by what was happening, but held his tongue until those given orders had rushed off to execute them, leaving them alone, not speaking, and softly when he did so, until he was sure there were no servants in earshot.

'So, brother, what is really afoot?'

That produced an immediate frown on the face of the *Guiscard*. He hated to be questioned, while there was also the fact of Geoffrey's greater age, which, if he deferred to Robert in leadership and title could not be gainsaid. The command of the Apulian Normans had come down through the line of de Hauteville brothers: first William, then to Drogo and Humphrey and, on the latter's death Geoffrey had been next in line. But it was clear who the men they led wanted, just as irascible Humphrey, who openly disliked Robert, knew who would hold what had been gained. Robert was popular as well as a brilliant general, and since each in turn had been chosen by acclamation, it became obvious that, put

to the men, he would be the one elected.

Geoffrey, who knew his limitations and was happy with the title he held as Count of Loritello, acquiesced in this: he was by far the most good-natured of the brood with an equanimity unusual in a Norman, never mind in the de Hauteville family. The second brother, Mauger, was more typical: he had served longer in Italy than Robert and had not been happy to bow the knee. So he had gone off with a large group of eighty lances, the men he had led for years, to seek his fortune elsewhere. He had just taken the land of a Lombard noble south of Salerno and was now ensconced in his stout castle of Scalea.

‘I need to draw Argyrus out.’

‘Obviously.’

‘Is it obvious?’ Robert snapped. ‘I see no evidence of anyone doing much thinking other than me.’

‘What would be the purpose, Robert, when you are the man who commands?’

‘I am open to suggestion.’

Geoffrey actually laughed, which got him a black look. ‘Let us leave aside the truth, that you are not and that you are secretive. Tell me what your plans are.’

Even with a man he trusted with his life, Robert hesitated, leaving Geoffrey to wonder what had happened to that bellicose jester who had first arrived from Normandy. Then he had been too open, too free with his opinions, nettling his elders with his denigration of their

abilities, not least William, the man who had created opportunity for all. Robert had been banished to the most barren part of Calabria for that attitude and Drogo, equally disapproving, had not brought him back when William died. Only the threat of the combined forces of the Pope, with levies from nearly all of northern Italy, and his alliance with Byzantium, had obliged Humphrey to recall him and he had sent him back to Calabria as soon as he could.

With a glance around to ensure no one could overhear him, Robert, much to his brother's amusement, came close and whispered in his ear.

Watching from the highest point on the walls, having with him a fellow whose eyesight he knew to be exceptional, Argyrus watched as the Normans, two thousand lances, departed in a cloud of dust, heading due north along the coast, marking the addition of the number of spare mounts, which indicated the distance needed to be travelled was great. Those on whom he relied in the countryside to the north, east and south would keep watch and, once they were out of sight would, that night, provided they were sure they had continued on their way, light small beacons on the higher hills to mark their passing.

'You must rest now,' he said to his trusted lookout, 'for you will be needed once darkness falls.'

Then he fell silent, wondering how long he should

wait before calling for an assembly of his soldiers. Too soon, with so many spies in the city, and word would leak before the *Guiscard* was gone. But he could not wait too long: opportunity was a fickle thing – it could evaporate in an instant.