

## PROLOGUE



Apulia was in turmoil and the Eastern Empire had only itself to blame: all the way up the Adriatic coast, with a few exceptions, the Byzantine possessions in Southern Italy were in open rebellion, the strife extending from the great trading ports to the rich agricultural lands that ran west to the high mountain barrier of the Apennines. Seeking to take advantage of a division between the Saracen emirs of the island of Sicily, Constantinople had decided to invade and reconquer that valuable possession, but in doing so, in order to find the soldiers necessary for the task, harsh methods of recruitment had been employed in their nearby Italian fiefs and the results of that had come home to roost.

Like the Roman Empire of antiquity, the Byzantine Empire was rarely free from trouble in its distant possessions; it could be no other way with borders that ran for a thousand leagues from the toe of Italy, through the mountainous Balkans, over the narrow neck of the Bosphorus and on into the wilds of Anatolia where it faced the newly emergent Turks. Apulia, as a province, was more febrile than most, containing within it a sizeable population of Greek rulers at permanent loggerheads with the indigenous Italians.

But there was a third, numerous and more seditious group to contend with: the Lombards, heirs of a northern tribe who had invaded five hundred years previously to conquer the whole of Italy. Rapacious as rulers, fractious by nature and unwilling to assimilate, they had never been popular and had, in their turn, succumbed to the combined might of the Emperor Charlemagne and overwhelming Byzantine force, hanging on as subject overlords only to the dukedoms and principalities of Campania and Benevento.

As a race they had never forgotten they once also ruled in fertile Apulia and were thus ever ready to fan the flames of an insurgency. Added to that they had, on both the western and northern borders, powerful Lombard magnates to whom they could appeal for aid, given they all shared a dream of one day creating an independent kingdom which would embrace all of Italy south of the Papal States.

The Eastern Empire had several assets to counterbalance that dream: a kingdom required a sovereign lord and no Lombard ever fully trusted or was willing to serve under another. In the past they had quarrelled amongst themselves and engaged in betrayal with more purpose than they ever brought to a common enemy, and Constantinople had long been expert, using streams of gold as well as brute force, at the tactic of divide and rule, both within and without its external borders.

Constantinople also enjoyed a steady supply of enterprising generals – men who knew how to pacify revolt – and young Michael Doukeianos, newly appointed as the Catapan of Apulia, was no exception. The one port still utterly unaffected – being the largest, and ruthlessly governed by Greeks – was Bari, and from there, with few trained men and even less in the way of resources,

Doukeianos set out to pacify the region known to his imperial masters as the Catapanate.

Speed of movement, paid-for betrayal, allied to that lack of cohesion amongst those he sought to overcome, were his most potent assets, giving him the ability to arrive outside a rebellious town or city before those inside were aware he was even approaching. Ill prepared to withstand his sudden assaults, with defences more often than not in an unready state, poorly led and bereft of external support, they fell one by one and the rebellion began to falter and die out.

Retaking imperial possessions was one thing; continuing to hold them with limited forces another. Every town and city in the Catapanate was partly or wholly fortified, most badly, a few formidably so: ports like Bari and Brindisi had stout walls and fortified harbours so strong that in the past they had withstood attempts to capture them lasting over a year. If inland towns had walls in different states of repair, they also had populations in a state of discontent, while to the north and west protection was needed from the Principality of Benevento and, on the eastern side of the Apennines, from the powerful Lombard fiefs of Campania: Salerno, Capua and Naples.

High in the mountains to guard against this lay a pair of immense forts, Troia and Melfi, strong enough to repel even the mighty forces of the heirs of Charlemagne. The danger for Doukeianos was simple: help from beyond those borders might still come and that would encourage those who had just rebelled in his bailiwick to rise up again. He did not have the troops to hold the vital Adriatic coastline, pacify the inland littoral and simultaneously man the mountain passes through which danger would come.

Norman mercenaries held the northern fortress of Troia, facing

a papal fief, the Principality of Benevento, men who had been in the pay of Constantinople for nearly two decades. But further south stood the now ungarrisoned bastion of Melfi, which controlled the route into Campania. Here an ally had to be found or bribed and he could only come from the indigenous population, including Lombards, not all of whom were adverse to Byzantine hegemony; that race contained amongst its number men who had often served the empire faithfully as paid retainers.

Arduin of Fassano was one such, and his record in that regard was exemplary. He had just returned from the faltering reconquest of Sicily, where he had led a contingent of Apulian pikemen in the Byzantine service, until he fell out with the irascible general in command, an arrogant giant called George Maniakes. Called upon by his fellow Lombards, on his return, to join in the revolt, he had declined to take part and cast his lot with the catapan. As an envoy he had gone some way to brokering reconciliation with many rebel strongholds on behalf of Doukeianos, thus avoiding bloodshed.

If he was seen as helpful to Byzantium he possessed one other quality, equally important: the assurance he could engage reliable men to man the border, suggesting the Normans of Campania, warriors he had fought alongside in the Sicilian campaign. The fiercest, most disciplined fighting troops in Christendom, and mercenaries, Normans could be relied on to oppose the enemies of whoever paid them. Scattered throughout the southern fiefs of Italy, these men from the Atlantic seaboard had, in the last twenty years, become numerous, so much so that in many places they provided an essential tool for anyone wishing to gain or hold on to power.

Arduin's argument for employing them was also telling: having

returned from Sicily – they too had fallen foul of the same arrogant Byzantine general – they were at present unemployed; if Doukeianos did not pay them someone else might, possibly causing him more trouble than the revolt he had just crushed.

‘The Normans are bred for war, Catapan, and they live off it. They will not sit idle and just polish their weapons. Better they are in your service than they be employed by another, or left free to raid and plunder.’

‘The men you encountered in Sicily are loyal to Guaimar of Salerno.’

‘They are loyal to his purse, Catapan, and I think, now they have returned, the Prince of Salerno, who has been troubled by their presence before, would welcome the notion they be engaged elsewhere.’

The Lombard held his breath: how much did this young and inexperienced catapan know of the Normans of Campania and the bubbling stew of Lombard politics? He would know the Norman leader was Rainulf Drengot, of advancing years now, but a man who had, as a young knight, taken part in a previous Lombard revolt in Apulia, one eventually crushed by another great Byzantine soldier called Basil Boioannes.

Beaten to the east of the Apennines, Rainulf and the men he led had prospered in the west through a combination of brute force, outright banditry and utter unreliability. Drengot had made himself militarily indispensable to one warring Lombard magnate in Campania, the late Duke of Salerno, only to later betray him by giving his support to his rival, the Prince of Capua. But Rainulf had gone one step further: thanks to another switch of allegiance, and by deserting Capua, he had been elevated to the title of the Imperial Count of Aversa, granted his gonfalon by no less a suzerain

than the Emperor Conrad Augustus, heir to mighty Charlemagne.

‘Would they serve?’

‘They will if Constantinople will pay them.’

‘It is I who will pay you, Arduin. I have no wish to deal with them directly.’

At least the catapan knew that much: the Normans were difficult people with whom to do business – demanding, quick to see weakness, sharp when it came to their own advantage and careful of what they perceived to be their honour.

‘As long as I have the means I am sure they will serve me, but you must tell me what it is you require.’

‘The key to protecting the border with Campania is the fortress at Melfi. As long as that is in my hands no force of invaders from there can hope to sustain itself in Apulia.’ Arduin knew the truth of what was being said, but he was also holding his breath for what he hoped was coming next. ‘And I am offering to you the post of *topoterites* of Melfi, if you can secure the services of enough Normans to hold it secure. I do not have the forces, myself, to garrison it properly and control the rest of the Catapanate.’

‘Will the emperor not send you more men?’

‘The Emperor Michael has no more men to send. He has serious trouble in Anatolia with the Turks and his armies are committed there. Do you accept my offer of Melfi?’

‘A great responsibility, Catapan,’ Arduin replied. ‘You do me great honour.’

‘I am sure you are worthy of it.’

Michael Doukeianos looked into a smiling, eager face. Had he been able to see behind that smile, as well as the dark brown eyes and the round, pallid face of the man before him, he would have been unsettled. Arduin of Fassano was a good soldier and

had proved his worth to Byzantium both in Sicily and in the recent rebellion. To give a man of his experience the captaincy of such an important fortress was, on the face of it, sound policy, but Doukeianos should have remembered he was dealing with a Lombard, and they were a race much given to duplicity.

Arduin had not joined the revolt just crushed for one very good reason: with an experienced military eye he had seen it was doomed to failure, but that did nothing to dent his feelings for Lombard aspirations. Yes, he had served Byzantium; he was a soldier and had gone to where there was a war to fight with pay and plunder to be gained, and once there had done his very best and earned the plaudits of his peers and superiors by turning unwilling Apulian conscripts into effective soldiers, but in his breast the flame of independence had never dimmed.

His father had been a soldier in the great uprising of twenty years past, led by the late and revered Lombard hero, Melus of Bari. This was the very same revolt which had seen engaged the likes of Rainulf Drengot – and Arduin's father had died fighting Basil Boioannes. As a lad he had been fired by parental ideas, and those he had never lost. It had been drummed into him that the time must come when Byzantium would be weak, when they could not find the forces to hold on to Apulia, told that would be the moment for the Lombards, under a competent leader, to strike and take back the power they had once held. Never mind that Melus of Bari had failed; was now the time and was he the man?

As he replied, he was aware of his rapidly beating heart, just as he was aware of the need to keep his voice, as well as his excitement, under control. 'Before I accept, Catapan, I must be sure that I can do as you ask. I must go to Aversa, and parley with the Normans.'

‘Go to Melfi first, and see what needs to be done. Make sure the locals are loyal, and if they are not, do what is required to get them on your side. Hang or bribe the leading citizens, that I leave to you, then you can go to your Normans.’

‘If I am to bribe and recruit, both require funds and any Norman worth his salt will want to see coin before they commit themselves.’

‘Never fear, Arduin,’ said Michael Doukeianos, grinning. ‘If Byzantium is short of fighting men, it is never, ever, short of the means to pay for support.’

## CHAPTER ONE



Any gathering of the sons of Tancred de Hauteville was bound to end up in reminiscence and this, taking place in the vestry of an Italian cathedral, given there were five of his offspring present, was no exception: they recollected the memories of growing up in the unruly Normandy region of the Contentin, of escapades, past quarrels, fights they had engaged in with each other, but more importantly with their neighbours, as well as raiders from the islands that lay off the Norman coast. And they talked of their father, sometimes in awe, sometimes with gales of laughter, but mostly with wry affection.

Tancred de Hauteville had been a noted warrior, as well as a man who bred sturdy and numerous sons – there were another seven brothers still at home, the product of two wives – and he had raised them to be puissant warriors like himself; their rank as the offspring of a petty Norman baron required no less. From their very first-taken steps they had been tutored in the use of weapons, toy wooden swords and shields, replaced by metal as soon as they could handle the weight, growing strong by constant practice, gifted on land and in water, swimming in the river that

ran through the family fields and then in the crashing waves of the nearby great ocean.

The time came when they could mount first a pony and then a horse; they had been taught to ride and use a lance so that one day they could, if fortune favoured them as it had their father, serve in battle under their liege lord, the Duke of Normandy, as part of a mounted fighting force greatly feared throughout Europe. Well fed on the produce of Tancred's fertile demesne, the sons came eventually to match and even tower over a parent whose own great height was often remarked upon.

Tancred never let them forget their Viking heritage, or that the five elder boys, through their mother, were half-blood relations to the ducal house. They came from a race and a lineage bred for combat: it was not for them but for others to cut timber, grow food, to sow and reap crops, to work the family salt pans and exploit the fishing rights which provided the means by which they could be armed.

Each had been provided with the weapons and equipment necessary for the tasks that lay ahead: the horses needed to carry them and their equipment to war, as well as a destrier to ride in battle, a sharp-tipped lance, a heavy, double-edged sword, a shield framed in metal, covered with hard wood and leather and painted in the de Hauteville colours of blue and white. Most expensive of all, but vital, each had been gifted a set of protective armour: a chain mail hauberk, gloves and a helmet.

The duty of vassalage obliged Tancred to provide to his duke ten lances, and that he had done – a task made so much easier as his elder sons, one by one and a year apart, grew to match then surpass his fighting ability. They also aided him mightily in his endemic disputes with neighbours, usually over land, water,

or rights to the produce of the Atlantic shoreline, and given their talent for combat the name de Hauteville had soon become one to be respected in the Contentin.

Yet that very number of sons brought with it a greater problem: the petty barony of Hauteville-la-Guichard could feed them as they grew to manhood, could arm and mount them to be warriors, but it was too small a demesne to satisfy their needs as adults. They required land of their own on which to raise families and to provide for them the revenues which supported a fighting knight.

Tancred had sought to get them placed as personal knights, part of the *familia* of his liege lord, the son of the man he himself had served so faithfully. That suzerain, Duke Robert of Normandy, had ignored written requests more than once, and had then rebuffed the same appeal in a face-to-face meeting. For men bred to war, with no hope of advancement in their homeland, the brothers de Hauteville, first William and Drogo, and now joined by Humphrey, Geoffrey and half-brother Mauger, had taken the well-worn route to Italy and mercenary service, where the martial prowess of the Normans was highly prized and well rewarded.

‘Enough,’ William insisted, as Drogo continued to relate those amatory adventures he had indulged in at home, quite forgetting the trouble his activities had caused: he was the father of more bastards than could be counted on the fingers of his hands. ‘Home is far off in time and distance. We must turn our thoughts to that which concerns us here.’

Drogo frowned more from habit than irritation; William might be the oldest and Tancred’s heir, but too often in their growing years he had assumed near-parental powers.

Yet he deferred to him, not just as an older sibling but also as

a chief; Rainulf Drengot commanded the Normans of Campania, but William was his senior captain and had led the mercenary contingent in the recent invasion of Sicily. A measure of his stature, gained in that conflict, was his soubriquet: he was now more commonly referred to by those he led as *Bras de Fer*, a title bestowed on him by his confrères after a single-combat encounter outside the walls of Syracuse. William Iron Arm had fought and defeated the ruling Saracen emir, a giant of a man who claimed to have on his belt the notches of a hundred skulls.

Humphrey, his beetle brow furrowed, stood suddenly, and went to the door that led from the vestry to the chancel of the cathedral, opening it to ensure no one was listening.

‘Suspicious as ever,’ said Mauger.

‘The only people I trust are in this room,’ Humphrey insisted, before sweeping the assembly with a glare on a face that, with its large overbite and close-set eyes, lacked beauty, ‘and that is not wholehearted.’

‘You sleep with your purse between your legs,’ scoffed Drogo, Humphrey’s parsimony and mistrustful nature being a family joke.

‘He would when you are around, brother,’ crowed Geoffrey.

Drogo laughed. ‘He has not got between his legs anything else to tempt me.’

‘I cannot think why you bother, Humphrey,’ William said with a weary air, looking at the now closed door. ‘Who would want to overhear this foolishness?’

‘You should slacken sometimes, Gill,’ Drogo insisted. ‘A little foolishness would do your soul good.’

For ‘foolishness’, Drogo meant gaiety and that covered much of the ground that lay as a difference between the two eldest

brothers. Drogo was mercurial by nature, laughing one second but equally likely to resort to a fist fight the next if he felt impugned. He was also a womaniser, never without a concubine to bed when he was at what passed for home, and ever on the lookout for companionship on campaign or when travelling. William was steady and serious, and while not, as Drogo called him, a eunuch, he was restrained in his carnality, engaging in the odd liaison, without ever forming permanent attachments.

‘I’ll leave the priests to worry for my soul, brother, because I have four of you to use up all my concern.’

‘We can look after ourselves,’ Mauger responded, with all the confidence of the youngest present.

‘Can you?’ William replied, looking past Mauger at the crucifix on the bare stone wall, the son of the God he had been raised to believe would see everything, and who would one day judge him for the sins he had committed in life. Then he looked at his brothers, all big men and broad of shoulder, all with golden hair and faces made red by the Italian sun. ‘I thought that too. I thought I had become heir to a brilliant future, only to have Rainulf snatch it away.’

‘His child may die.’

William responded to Geoffrey with a withering look. ‘And with a willing bedmate he may breed many more.’

That induced a long silence, as each of the recently arrived trio contemplated what had happened since William and Drogo had come to Italy. Both had taken service with Rainulf Drenogot and both, through sheer ability, had risen to lead companies of men, William even more. He had become Rainulf’s right hand, to be consulted frequently at a time when Campania was in turmoil and the mercenary leader had himself felt under threat.

Drengot had betrayed the Duke of Salerno, a trusting soul who had granted him not only the hand of his daughter but also the dowry gift of the Lordship of Aversa, raising him from mere paid retainer to the status of influential landowner in his own right. Rainulf had shown little in the way of gratitude: when his wife died he had switched his allegiance, and thus the overpowering force he could put in the field, to a fellow of staggering mendacity called Pandulf, Prince of Capua, marrying his sister to seal the bargain. A termagant and an unwilling spouse, that was a union Rainulf had come to much regret.

Even for a Lombard, Pandulf of Capua, known to all as the Wolf of the Abruzzi, had shown a greed and lack of integrity that was remarkable. Having deposed the Duke of Salerno and dispossessed his remaining children, he had grown even more grasping, bearing down on subjects in both fiefs, people who hated him, and stripping from them, with Rainulf's help, ever-increasing wealth. No one, petty baron, trader, farmer, priest, bishop or monk was safe from his depredations.

Pandulf loved gold, not God, and like all avaricious men, he had, in time, overreached himself, attacking and ravaging the lands of the wealthy Monastery of Montecassino. Not content to merely seize its treasury, he threw the elderly Abbot Theodore into his dungeons and parcelled out the monastery's extensive lands to Normans, men he had suborned from Rainulf's service. Indeed, from being the greatest source of Rainulf's wealth Pandulf had become too powerful, a threat to the now ageing mercenary leader – childless, and, thanks to his tempestuous marriage, much given to taking refuge in drink.

The Wolf's depredations had, through the intercession of Guaimar, the Duke of Salerno's son, reached the ear of the Western

Emperor, Conrad Augustus, but it was what he had done to the holy men of Montecassino that proved his downfall. The irate emperor had come south from Germany with a great army to restore Montecassino and put the villain in his own dungeons. William de Hauteville, advising Rainulf to leave his untrustworthy ally to his fate, had engineered a truce with Conrad – a combination of force that obliged Pandulf to flee.

The reward for Rainulf had been imperial confirmation of his title under Guaimar, the newly elevated Prince of both Salerno and Capua. This, for a Norman who had come to Italy with nothing but his horses and his weapons, was elevation indeed, a title and fiefdom from which only the emperor could remove him. At the ceremony of investiture outside the walls of Capua, Rainulf had brought forward William and embraced him, bidding him kiss the gonfalon that denoted his title, an indication from a man without offspring that his senior captain should be his heir.

William had gone off to Sicily leading all but a hundred of Rainulf's men, sustained by that promise of a brilliant future; he had returned to find Rainulf's termagant wife shut up in a nunnery, a new young and lusty concubine in his bed, the Imperial Count of Aversa sober and cradling in his arms a mewling male infant he called Hermann, who would one day, he made plain, succeed to his lands and title; William de Hauteville would get nothing!

'Put the matter to the vote,' Drogo suggested, not for the first time. 'Let the men decide who to follow, you or Rainulf.'

William looked at Drogo long and hard. They had been through much together, growing up, in coming to this place and what had occurred since. Drogo had been his lieutenant in Sicily and had not in any way let him down; he was a fighter any man would be happy to have at his side. His flaw, if you excluded his

inability to pass a woman without trying to bed her, was his lack of judgement. Yet looking around the faces of his brothers he saw they too shared Drogo's view.

Perhaps because William was the eldest of a large and unruly clan he had a better grasp of reality, the very quality which had led Rainulf to previously rely on him for advice. All his life, when Tancred and his parental wrath needed to be kept in the dark about some family problem, he had been required to intercede with one brother against another and, in Drogo's case, with more than one irate father. For every time his judgement had been accepted, there had been many more where he had been obliged to ensure acceptance of the right course with a thump around the ear. That would not serve now they were all grown men. Yet he needed them on his side.

'Right now it would break the band apart, Drogo. Not all the men would follow me and Rainulf would not let such an insult pass. A split like that would lead to bloodshed, which, I suspect, might please many people, but in the end it would resolve nothing. Rainulf would still not reinstate me as the heir to his title and I am not prepared to fight and kill my fellow Normans for something I cannot have.'

'Go back to Prince Guaimar,' suggested Humphrey. 'He has the power to force Rainulf to keep his word.'

Having tried that once, and been rebuffed, William had no desire to do so again. 'That would be to beg and, besides, you are wrong. To make Rainulf bend the knee in such an important matter would cause Prince Guaimar more trouble than he desires to have, and do not doubt for a moment he takes pleasure in our mutual dissension.'

'So you just accept being cheated?'

‘It’s Duke Robert all over again,’ said Mauger.

That took William back to Normandy, just days before the first major battle of his life, to the great ducal pavilion hard by the hamlet of Giverny, in which he had first laid eyes on his then liege lord. Duke Robert had not been happy at the way Tancred de Hauteville, leading his sons, had forced his way into his presence, even less joyful when he had been reminded that five of those boys shared with him a bloodline through their late mother, albeit one carrying the taint of illegitimacy.

It had been a less than joyful interview for a man who liked to be styled Robert the Magnificent: Tancred was not one to show excessive respect, of the kind Robert had come to expect from fawning courtiers. Like an uncle to the family of the duke, this was a man he had known since childhood, who he had, along with his elder brother, tossed high in the air. Rumours abounded that Duke Robert had poisoned that elder brother to gain his title; those who believed such an accusation to be a literal truth called him Robert the Devil.

Tancred had raised his sons with one aim in mind: the prospect of joining the *familia* knights of the ducal household, the men who served their liege lord close and would die in battle to keep him safe, the reward for good service being the captaincy of a castle, maybe even lands and possibly a title of their own. Duke Robert had disabused him: he had no trust in the connection of bastard blood, even less in Tancred or his sons.

He would not allow any de Hauteville to serve him close, for fear of what they might do to his own born-out-of-wedlock son, who was now, following Robert’s death, the reigning Duke of Normandy. Rabidly ambitious himself, Robert could not be brought to even consider that these tall and sturdy boys were free

of that trait, nor that the solemn vow Tancred had made to his own father would bind them to his service, a refusal which had brought them to this place and this conundrum.

‘We have no choice but to do now what we did then,’ William insisted. ‘We must look for good fortune elsewhere. I want to be sure that whatever I do I can count on your support.’

‘To whom else would we give it?’ asked Mauger, who could not hide the look in his eye, one that told all present how much he worshipped a brother many years his senior.

That brought forth a smile. ‘No one, Mauger, but I wish to remind you all we are bound together, that we are de Hautevilles, in the same way our father was wont to remind us—’

‘Endlessly,’ Humphrey interjected, champing those very prominent top teeth, he being one son who was sure he had never truly enjoyed his father’s love.

Geoffrey spoke next. ‘You are our leader by right as well as birth, William.’

‘Is it sacrilegious to puke in church?’ asked Drogo, though he grinned to make sure all understood he was joking.

‘From now on there are two worlds, that outside and ours. I will seek your support when there is no time to explain why, but know this: I will always act in all our interests, not just my own. I ask you, as our father did, to swear on the Holy Cross that you will follow me wherever that may lead us, and I ask you to renew the vow he made us all swear before we left Normandy, never to raise a weapon against each other.’

William hauled out his sword and knelt, the others following, each using hilt and pommel as a personal cross, to take the oath William had asked of them, their eyes fixed on the crucified Christ as they pledged their word.

‘You said elsewhere,’ Drogo said as they stood again. ‘Where would that be?’

‘Apulia.’

‘Why Apulia?’

That question was posed with a look of deep suspicion. William, he well knew, was capable of laying deep and long-sighted plans. He was also inclined to keep such things to himself and this time was no exception.

‘Wait and see. Now stir yourselves, it is time we ended our devotions and returned to camp.’

‘What devotions?’ Geoffrey demanded, a reasonable question since no prayers, barring the oath just taken, had been said.

William smiled. ‘The ones I told Rainulf were due today, a Mass for the soul of our late mother.’

‘But...’ Geoffrey paused before stating the obvious: this was not the day on which the mother he shared with everyone except young Mauger had passed away.

## CHAPTER TWO



A mock tourney it might be, more a way of exercising fighting men to avoid them becoming rusty, rather than proper warfare, but today would, nevertheless, be brutal. No one should die, but none would emerge lacking a bruise and quite a few would need days in their cot to recover, added to the ministrations of their womenfolk and, perhaps, a mendicant monk from nearby Aversa. William de Hauteville, still the senior captain, had arranged the fighting contingents, several of them led by his own brothers – but if they were united by blood, they were also animated by the desire to prove their fighting worth; no sibling could expect gentility from another.

On the open agricultural plains of Campania, finding room to deploy four hundred mounted warriors presented little difficulty, and if some crops got trampled in the process, well, these were Rainulf's own lands, the peasants his to command, the rich soil his to exploit, so they would be obliged to watch the destruction of their careful husbandry and ploughed fields in silence.

William, aware of this, and as a sop to their depleted larders, had arranged they should participate in the feast which would

follow the tournament – several oxen were already roasting on spits – an act which had earned him a snort of disapproval from his chief.

‘They will not love you for it,’ Rainulf insisted, looking up at a man who towered over him by several hands, his purple-veined face censorious. ‘The Italian peasant understands only hard treatment, and if you are soft on them, your reward, one dark night, will most likely be a knife in the back.’

‘Part of the crops we destroy are theirs to live off. If we are taking the food from their mouths, it does no harm to put some back.’

‘My crops, my food! I could overrule you.’

‘You could,’ William replied, his tone as cold as his stare.

The locked eyes and stony expressions, which followed that exchange, underlined how things had altered between these men in the last two and a half years. At one time Rainulf would have welcomed the suggestion from a man he trusted absolutely; now there was some doubt if he could tolerate the speaker’s presence.

‘It is time and Prince Guaimar is waiting,’ William said, indicating with a finger that the powerful Italian sun was well past its zenith, that the day was cooling and so it was time to commence the tourney.

Mention of his titular overlord had Rainulf looking to the elevated, shaded pavilion he had erected so the party from Salerno could watch the tourney in comfort. Prince Guaimar, at a mere twenty years still looking too young for his title, was seated next to his wife and young son, she holding a newly born daughter still at the suckling stage, while his sister, Berengara, her radiant beauty evident even at a distance, sat on their left. On the right of the prince sat another Lombard called Arduin of Fassano, a

fellow known to William but not to Rainulf. Behind the prince, alongside the various officials from Guaimar's court, sat Rainulf's slender young concubine, his new bedmate, holding his restless child, Hermann.

'Odd,' Rainulf observed, with no attempt to disguise a degree of contempt. 'Guaimar is a prince who has never led men, never seen a real battle, yet I, who have seen and spilt much blood, must bow to his title.'

William was about to reply that the prince had in his veins the blood of his forbears, but he checked himself: to mention such a lineage was to raise the spectre of Rainulf's bastard son, a subject best avoided.

'He has the good sense to let we Normans do his fighting.'

'The other fellow, Arduin, you know him from Sicily?'

'I do.'

'And?' Rainulf said querulously, not happy at having to drag out information.

'A good soldier, he commanded the contingent of pikemen from Apulia, and given they were reluctant to serve, he trained and led them well.'

'Trustworthy?'

'He's a Lombard, Rainulf.'

The squat older Norman nodded, which made the spare flesh under his chin more pronounced; that remark required no further clarification for a man who knew the Lombards better than most and shared with them a history of conspiracy.

'Any notion of why he is here?'

William knew very well why he was here: realising that Rainulf was intent on breaking his word regarding the succession, he had gone to see Prince Guaimar in Salerno, and, in a disappointing

interview, in which he had tried and failed to get him to remind his vassal of his promise, the prince had told him about Arduin and his appointment as the *topoterites* of Melfi. He had also told him of the plan to betray his new master, Michael Doukeianos. It was telling that Guaimar had yet to inform Rainulf.

‘My guess is he will be looking for lances.’

‘To fight where?’

William just shrugged.

‘Then it is time we showed him of what we are made.’

Rainulf was now too long in the tooth to spend much time in the saddle; he would watch with Guaimar, and no doubt use his proximity to press the prince once more for help. He had asked the Papacy to grant him an annulment of his marriage to his second wife, without which he could not legitimise his child, Rome being a place where a Lombard prince could apply more weight than any Norman. William knew he was wasting his time, and not just because of the tangle of Roman politics: Guaimar had only borne his title for less than three full years but had learnt very quickly that the best way to sustain his power was to keep alive dissension amongst those who might oppose him.

He would no more act as Rainulf requested than respond to William’s appeal, and for the same reason. All the advantage for him lay in the strained relations between the two Norman leaders. In fact, there were very good grounds to suppose that Prince Guaimar was doing the very reverse of what Drenkot required – this made easy by the endless jockeying of several claimants to the papal title – using whatever influence he had in Rome to block that which Rainulf sought, and thus keep him dependent.

Guaimar had grown in acumen as he had become accustomed to power and, no doubt, fatherhood had sharpened his resolve. He

was no longer the young innocent William had first encountered – the dispossessed son of the previous ruler, easily outwitted in negotiation. Now he had a mind that could calculate where his advantage lay and he applied it well. He might smile at Rainulf, but he would never fully trust him, never forget this was the same man who had betrayed his father.

Should he falter in that resolve his younger sister was ever present to remind him. Berengara had her beauty, but that was leavened by a degree of spite aimed at the Normans, any Norman, which made speaking with her an exercise in bile. She hated the men who had betrayed her family with unabated passion, and rumour had it she had traded her virtue to put pressure on Conrad Augustus to come south and restore her brother to his fief. The Normans, when the news came that the Holy Roman Emperor had expired, were inclined to put his demise down to her poisonous embrace.

William's relations with her were no better than those of his confrères, but he was prone to guying her when chance presented itself, given that she never failed to react. Much as he despised Frankish customs – no true Norman had any respect for their French or Angevin neighbours – he had heard that the knights of Paris and Tours were wont to request from a lady, prior to an event such as this, some favour to decorate their weapons. Thus, before he rode out to commence matters, he stopped before the pavilion and lowered the padded point of his lance till it was before her face.

'My lady, I am told it is the custom of the northern courts to beg support from a fair maiden prior to combat.'

Berengara knew she was being played upon, and if she had had any doubts, the smile – or was it a smirk? – on William's face, would have told her so.

Her brother sought to head off her angry response, by speaking first. 'It is not yet the custom in Italy.'

'You may have my favour,' said Berengara, swiftly, removing a thin shawl, which had covered her bosom, pleased by the way William's eye was drawn to that which was revealed. She was still smiling when she spat on it, followed by a swift twist round his lance. 'And also you now have my sentiments as well.'

William laughed out loud, which wiped the acid smile off her face, before he hauled round his mount and headed out into the open, past the curious peasantry, to where the entire force of Rainulf's mercenaries was lined up.

'He has pride, that one,' whispered Arduin to Guaimar, 'and has the gift of command as well. I saw him fight outside Syracuse, and he is formidable both in single combat and in battle.'

'They all are that, Arduin,' Guaimar replied in the same soft tone. 'So much so, that they are also a menace. You will do me a service if you take most of them out of my lands.'

The sound of a battle horn, a single long note, floated across the open fields, the signal for the tournament to commence.

'It is the catapan's gold that will take them there, Prince Guaimar, and I will give them Melfi, but they need two other things if we are to foment a real revolt that will not only break Byzantium, but elevate the Lombard cause: a leader and a purpose.'

'Will you not lead them?'

'I am but a soldier, with no land and only the title gifted to me by the catapan. Militarily I can command, but to head the enterprise I have outlined requires a nobleman of stature, someone under whose banner the Italians and Lombards can unite against the Greeks. It is not modesty, but truth, to say they will not follow me.'

The invitation was obvious in the words and look, a request that

Guaimar should raise the banner of Lombard revolt in Apulia, an offer he would decline. Arduin might say, and indeed might believe, Byzantium was uniquely weak and vulnerable at this time, but if revolts had failed in the past they could do so again and, previously, retribution had been bloody and swift. Whoever raised the standard would, if things went against him, pay a heavy price.

If an army could invade Apulia, a rampaging Byzantine host could do the same to Campania, quite apart from the prospect of a powerful fleet sailing from the Bosphorus, then appearing in the Bay of Salerno, which had also happened before. Guaimar had held his title for too little a time to place it in jeopardy; let another take the risk, as long as he was around for a share of any reward should they enjoy success.

‘I think when you leave here you should pay a call upon the Prince of Benevento.’

‘You think Prince Landulf will take the lead?’

‘I was thinking more that Argyrus, the son of the great Melus, now resides in Benevento.’

Melus was a potent name, as the man who had so nearly succeeded in the task Arduin was now setting out to repeat. Argyrus, his son, had only recently been released from imprisonment in Constantinople, as a sop to Lombard sensibilities. He was, as of this moment, an unknown quantity, but his name was worth half an army.

‘His presence is known to Byzantium. To lead another revolt he must have permission from the Prince of Benevento. Would Landulf agree to let him participate?’

‘I think he might. Benevento has much to gain if there is any success.’

*So do you*, Arduin thought, but he kept that to himself.

There was no metal in use this day, for the very simple reason that every one of the men assembled was either young or too seasoned a fighter. The former were, by nature, hot-headed in battle, the rest too proud to take lightly being bested by another. No trust could be placed in their restraint, and the use of swords and metal-tipped lances would lead to multiple deaths. What William wanted was to exercise the horses and men, not in the tens of the standard Norman conroy, but in the mass, to underscore the lessons learnt in Sicily. He wanted them to behave as the mounted component of an army.

The purpose of doing so he had kept from Rainulf: in his meeting with Prince Guaimar he had as good as acceded to the notion of taking service with Arduin. He would follow the Lombard to Melfi and take possession of the fortress, and, under his command, invade Apulia. But on this expedition he was determined to act on behalf of himself and his family. If Rainulf Drengot could gain land and title in Campania, then William de Hauteville was determined he would do the same in those fresh pastures.

There would be many obstacles along the way, not least the Byzantines, who were formidable in adversity. He would also have to outwit the Lombards, Prince Guaimar, and Rainulf, all of whom would see him only as a mercenary, or in the Norman leader's case, a captain, acting on his behalf. His brothers, in that vestry, had more or less accused him of allowing himself to be cheated; they too would learn that their elder brother had the wit and guile to outmanoeuvre those he felt had duped him.

The mercenaries had been broken up into bands of one hundred lances, and their first task was to attack a long false wooden shield wall William had had erected fifty paces from the front of the elevated pavilion and the assembled guests; let them feel some

sense of what it was like to face a Norman host. Taking station to the right of the first line, commanded by Drogo, William ordered them forward, noting that no command was required for another captain, called Turmod, to advance his own century after a slight gap.

Humphrey, with Rainulf's blessing, had been elevated to command for the day, and so had brother Geoffrey, which left Mauger fuming as the only de Hauteville not leading one of the four assault lines. He was obliged to act as William's aide, which, hero worship notwithstanding, was not enough to mollify him, and as he sat alongside his elder brother his frustration was not something that could be hidden by either helmet or nose guard.

The strength of Norman cavalry lay in their use of weight as opposed to tempo. Horsemen of other armies charged, hoping by sheer brio to break an enemy line, which inevitably led to some moving at more speed than the rest so they arrived at the point of battle as a disorganised melee. The Norman line was solid, the destriers they rode chosen not for fleetness but for their sturdy nature. Both horse and rider were trained to hold their line and hit an enemy position as a formidable mass.

This required well-practised horsemanship and constant attention; no steed next to another could entirely be weaned off the desire to race: a horse did not require to be told *how* to run, but when. To hold them in exact relation to their neighbouring mounts took endless training as well as strong hands and thighs, the latter becoming immeasurably more important as the point of actual combat approached: the rider would be looking to use his hands for his lance and his shield, albeit he would still hold a rein. Once battle was joined, the main pressure a warrior would have to control his mount was those thighs.

No mock tourney could ever be like the real thing, but for the likes of Guaimar, who was no soldier, the sight of a hundred lances attacking in his direction made him tense, even if he knew they were blunted and it represented no threat, so much so that he put a protective arm around Gisulf, his young son. Looking past his wife at his sister, he was surprised to see how excited she was, her body tensed and leaning slightly forward, her mouth open and the one eye he could see alight with anticipation, nothing like the frisson of fear in his own.

The Normans were now standing in their stirrups, the hooves of their horses kicking up a huge cloud of dust, their lances couched under their arms and their teardrop-shaped shields, coloured in the red and black of Rainulf Drengot, set forward to protect both themselves and the flank of their horse; two hundred eyes and those padded lance points, in Guaimar's over-vivid imagination, fixed on the point of his chest.

Berengara's body jerked as the points hit the wood, a hundred thuds like a tattoo of many drums melding so close as to be as one, mixed with the battle-cry shouts of the attackers. It was what happened next that was most impressive. At the sound of a battle horn all hundred riders spun their horses to run parallel with the wall and, jabbing their tipless lances at imaginary foes over the top of the shields, they moved as one at a steady canter, and there, behind them as soon as they were clear, were another hundred lances a few grains of sand away from contact.

That century turned right to get clear, and the sight of another attack was repeated twice more, in a series of sounds and cries, each one of which seemed to pass like a lightning strike through Berengara's tensed frame. But her excitement did not end there, for Drogo's century was approaching again, this time with lances held

high, to be thrown on command at the straw bales which lay in front of her. Those dispatched, swords were unsheathed and the wood hacked at with great force, sending splinters flying from the edge as they again made their steady way to the left to be replaced by another century executing the same manoeuvre.

‘Few would stand against this, Prince Guaimar,’ shouted Rainulf, also in a state of high excitement. ‘Most would have broken by now.’

Locking eyes with the Norman leader, the young Lombard wondered if there was an implied threat in the observation. Was Rainulf telling him that no army of conscript Italians and Lombards could sustain him if he chose to challenge such a host?

‘The Varangians would stand,’ called Arduin.

That reference to the axemen of Kiev Rus brought to Rainulf’s face a deep frown. He had fought them in the Lombard revolt led by Melus, and he had lost his elder brother in the final battle. A force of Norse lineage provided to Constantinople by the Prince of Kiev, the Varangians were indeed formidable and their chosen weapon, axes swung and thrown, were deadly against both horse and rider.

‘I saw them in Sicily, Count Rainulf, and I came to admire them greatly.’

Rainulf just jerked his head to look to the front; he did not want to talk of Varangians or of campaigns led by William de Hauteville. His eyes were now on the two lines of Normans who had taken station facing each other, and at a command they closed, first seeking to unhorse the men they fought, then, once the lance had been used or abandoned, fighting each other on horseback with hardwood swords. No mercy was shown to anyone who left an opening: several jabbing and slashing men were dismounted to fall at the feet of, and scabble away from, the heaving mass of hooves, more dangerous by far than that which they had faced in the saddle.

At the sound of the horn they disengaged and were replaced by the other two centuries, the whole confrontation repeated with the same level of effort. To the rear, men could be seen limping away both from the previous battle and this, while the odd mercenary lay comatose where they had fallen, as their confrères tried to continue to jab, slash and parry without simultaneously trampling them.

‘Look,’ cried Berengara, as the two lines disengaged and withdrew.

She was pointing to a line of marching Normans, making their way through the clouds of dust left by their previous mounted engagement. Only on foot could you truly appreciate that these warriors were likely to tower over any enemy they faced. Every one was well above whatever height could be named as average, and in the middle of the line it was impossible to miss William de Hauteville, taller still, with his brother, Mauger, a hand smaller, at his side.

He led his men to the shield wall where they began hacking away, reducing what was left of the wood of the defence to shards, which set young Gisulf to crying, a sound which had no effect on the swordsmen but one which had his mother take him away from the noise. Destruction complete, the Normans retired, exchanging their weapons for wooden replacements, as two centuries faced each other in foot combat, coming together with a series of loud cracks and screaming imprecations as they fought each other in mock battle.

William had by this time remounted, and it came to the point which interested him greatly. There was a tactic he knew his men could use mounted – the false retreat. Could they do it on foot? He had deliberately left till last a fight between men who had served him in Sicily, under Drogo’s direct command, and those of Turmod’s troop, who had stayed behind in Aversa to protect both

Rainulf and Prince Guaimar, knowing there was a deep degree of rivalry between them.

Only Drogo knew he was going to give the horn signal for a false retreat; would his men realise that it applied to them unmounted? Drogo was key, as was any commander in a conflict, but in this the Normans had their other great asset: close battlefield control. They knew the commands just as they knew they must be obeyed; it was not their job to think but to obey. The horn blew its triple notes and William saw his brother's sword in the air, waving as he fell back, pleased to see that his shouts and gestures were bearing fruit – his men had disengaged.

Turmod's men should have known better: they were Normans too, but they could not resist moving forward to pursue, a fatal tactic, because they did not all do so at the same pace, creating dog-leg gaps. William signalled for the horn to blow again, and watched with pride as Drogo turned his men round in a tight line and rushed them forward, completely overwhelming their opponents and driving them back, inflicting more bruises on that century than had been suffered by any other in the day.

If he had been looking at the pavilion, he would have seen an irate Rainulf ranting about the deviousness of his senior captain, for he was soldier enough to know it had been he who had initiated the manoeuvre. William would not have cared: as a leader he had just added another string to his tactical ability; everyone in Rainulf's band had seen it, now all four hundred lances would know what to do in the future.

The sun was sinking, the light going, the wounded were being helped away, and in the gathering gloom the fires of those roasting oxen glowed, while torches by the hundred were being lit around twin rows of great tables. It was time to eat and drink.