

I

Vallon's squadron struck the Via Egnatia around noon and pounded on down the paved road towards the west. They rode with fierce determination, bloodshot eyes fixed straight ahead, and at sunset three days later – the sixteenth day of October – they pulled up their blown horses on a wooded ridge overlooking the Adriatic coast. Vallon leaned forward, squinting into the evening light. The sun had already sunk halfway beneath the sea, leaving a burnished copper fairway fanning back to the port of Dyrrachium. From this distance the city was just a tiny blur, too far away for him to make out the Norman positions or the damage inflicted by their siege weapons.

Shortening focus, Vallon studied the Byzantine encampment about four miles inland, entrenched in a broad rectangle along a meandering river. A pall of dust half a mile long drifted away from the camp.

He glanced at Josselin, one of his centurions. 'It would appear that we're the last scrapings of the imperial barrel.'

Josselin nodded. 'Judging by the size of those earthworks, I'd put our strength at more than fifteen thousand.'

Vallon conned the terrain, trying to work out where the battle would be fought. On the plain north of the city, he decided.

Only a sliver of sun remained above the horizon and the sea had darkened to deep violet and indigo. He looked back down the line. His Turkmen troops dozed in their saddles. Most of the rest of the squadron had dismounted and sat slumped against the cork oaks, their eyes raw hollows in faces masked with dust. In the last two weeks they'd ridden four hundred miles cross-grain through the Balkans from Bulgaria's Danube border, and now they looked more like the survivors of a battle rather than warriors about to go into action.

From the hillside below came the clanking of sheep bells and the sweet rattle of running water. Some of the soldiers were already ferrying skins and barrels back up to their comrades and their thirsty mounts. Vallon's three centurions sat their horses, waiting for his orders. He hawked to clear the dust from his throat. 'It will be hell if we arrive at the camp after dark. Endless questions, ordered from pillar to post. We'll be lucky to find a billet before dawn. We'll rest here tonight and ride in before sunrise. Dole out what's left of our provisions.' He turned to Conrad, his second-in-command, a German from Silesia. 'Captain, pick ten men, smarten them up and inform headquarters of our arrival. Take the wounded in one of the supply carts. Beg or borrow whatever food you can. Find out what's going on and send a report.'

'Yes, Count.'

Vallon's rank wasn't as grand as it sounded. As *Kome* of a *bandon*, he commanded a squadron of light and medium cavalry numbering two hundred and ninety-six men by this morning's muster. That was twenty fewer than when he'd left Constantinople for the Bulgarian marches seven months ago. The Outlanders they were called – mercenaries recruited from all over the Byzantine empire and beyond.

Shadows were pooling among the trees when Conrad's party left, the wheels of the wagon wobbling and squeaking on its worn axle, five bandaged casualties lying in its bed. Vallon led his horse towards the spring, limping slightly – the effect of a ligament torn in a swordfight nine years earlier. At the age of thirty-nine, he was beginning to count the cost of even the minor wounds and knocks he'd suffered in more than twenty years of campaigning.

The spring ran bubbling from the base of an ancient holm oak whose trunk parted from the roots to create a cleft housing a painted statue of the Virgin holding the baby Jesus. Icons, bells and wind chimes hung from the branches. An old man with a face like an empty purse sat beside the spring, his arms crossed tight over his chest. A boy attended him, one hand placed on the patriarch's shoulder.

Vallon nodded at him. ‘God keep you, father.’

‘Your men are stealing my water.’

Vallon dropped to his knees beside his horse. ‘It seems to me that there’s not one drop less than when we arrived.’

The old man rocked back and forth in resentment. His eyes were clouded. ‘The spring is sacred. You should pay for it.’

Vallon leaned over the pool, pushed back his hair and scooped a handful of water into his parched mouth. His eyes closed in rapture at the delicious sensation of cool liquid sliding down his throat. ‘All water’s sacred to men who thirst. But who to pay? He who created it or the man who guards it? I’ll gladly offer my prayers to both.’

The old man mumbled to himself.

Vallon wiped his mouth and nodded towards the plain, where fires were beginning to prick the rising tide of darkness. ‘Do you know what’s going on down there?’

The old man spat. ‘Murder, rape, thievery – all the ills that follow in an army’s train.’

Vallon smiled. ‘I’ll tell you what I will pay for.’ He fished a few coins from his purse and pressed them into the wrinkled palm. ‘Some of my men have the marsh sickness from spending too long on the Danube plain. They can’t stomach rough rations. If you could spare a basket of eggs, some milk and fresh bread . . .’

The boy took the coins and examined the imperial heads. ‘They’re good, Grandpa.’

The old man squinted sightlessly. ‘You’re not a Greek.’

‘A Frank. Driven by life’s tempests to this far shore.’

The man struggled to his feet. ‘Franks, English, Russians, Turks . . . The empire’s infested with foreign soldiers.’

‘Who are fighting to defend its borders while your native-born lords show off the latest fashions in the Hippodrome.’

The boy guided his grandfather away down the hillside. Vallon chewed a supper of raisins and hardtack, drew a blanket around his shoulders and dropped into sleep to the tinkling of bells.

The boy returning woke him. ‘Here are eggs and bread, Lord.’

Vallon rubbed his eyes and faced uphill. ‘Captain Josselin, some food for the invalids.’

When the officer left, Vallon hunched forward, examining the fires of the imperial army laid out in a grid, the flames of the Normans strung in a burning necklace around the beleaguered city. All he knew about the Norman force was that it was led by Robert Guiscard, the ‘Crafty’, Duke of Apulia and Calabria, a general of genius who’d ridden into Italy as a mere adventurer and within fifteen years had carved out a dukedom and made the pope his staunch ally.

A torch flickered through the trees, approaching up the road. Hooves clattered. By the light of the wind-torn brand, Vallon made out a rider leading a packhorse. The rider drew closer, a man of massive bulk. Tongues of flame fleeted across a braided vermilion beard, receding yellow hair, a red tunic medallioned in gold.

Shadows darted into the path of the rider. ‘Halt! Who goes there?’

‘Beorn the Bashful, *primikerios* in the Varangian Guard. Are you Count Vallon’s men? Good. Lead me to him.’

Vallon grinned and stood. ‘I’m up here by the spring.’

Beorn slid off his horse, lumbered through the trees and seized Vallon in a scented embrace. The impression of bulk wasn’t false. The man had to walk sideways through doors and his chest was almost as deep as it was broad, yet in matters of grooming he was very dainty.

‘What are you doing moping in the dark?’

‘We’ve been riding hard for weeks and I fell asleep through sheer weariness.’

‘You nearly missed the feast. Which reminds me. I ran into your German centurion and he said you’ve been living on worms for the last month. I brought some food. You can’t fight on a hollow stomach.’

Vallon took Beorn’s hands. ‘My dear friend.’

Beorn was an exile like him, an English earl, a veteran of the battles at Stamford Bridge and Hastings who had lost his estate in

Kent to the Normans. Vallon had forged a friendship with him while campaigning in Anatolia. They had saved each other's lives and the bond was reinforced when Beorn discovered that Vallon had made a journey to England, spoke the language and had gone wayfaring in the far north with an English companion.

The Varangian turned to the sentries. 'Unslung those panniers. Bring them over here.'

The sentries doubled over under the weight of the loads. Beorn opened one of them and rummaged through its contents. 'Wrong one. Hand me the other.' He delved into it, gave a grunt of satisfaction and lifted out a roast chicken. 'Brought three of them.'

'I can't fill my belly with meat while my men gnaw stale biscuits.'

'Same old Vallon. I directed your German captain to the Master of the Camp. Your men will have all the food they can eat by midnight. We'll keep one fowl for ourselves and you can do what you like with the others.' He held up a flask. 'But this is just for the two of us. Finest Malmsey from Cyprus. Tell your men to light a fire. You and I have a lot to talk about and I want to see your face while I'm about it.'

Vallon laughed and called to his centurions. They carried off the food and soldiers bustled to lay kindling and branches.

Vallon held out his hands as the wood began to crackle. 'So we're definitely committed to battle.'

Beorn wrenched a leg off the chicken and passed it to Vallon. 'I pray God we are. The emperor arrived yesterday. Another two days and you would have missed the action.'

'Would that be the same emperor as when I left?' Vallon saw Beorn's brows bristle. 'Alexius is the fourth I've served under in nine years.'

Beorn tore off a piece of chicken with his teeth. 'The same, except that Alexius is different from the others. He's a soldier's emperor. Fought his first battle against the Seljuks when he was fourteen and has not been on the losing side since. Wily in war as he is in diplomacy.'

Vallon gestured at the fires winking on the plain. 'I'm not even sure what's led to this confrontation. I'd already left for the north when Alexius was crowned, and I only received orders to ride to Dyrrachium a fortnight ago. News is slow to reach the Danube.'

Beorn cocked a shaggy brow. 'Hard time of it on the frontier? I saw the wounded men in your wagon.'

'The Pechenegs harried us as we withdrew. Sending my squadron to defend the border against horse nomads is like setting a dog to catch flies. Most of our losses were due to sickness rather than action.'

Beorn gnawed a drumstick. 'It's been brewing for years, ever since the Emperor Michael was overthrown after offering the hand of his son to Duke Robert's daughter. Gave the duke the excuse he needed to invade. He sailed from Brindisi this May, took Corfu without a fight and marched on Dyrrachium. His fleet followed but was hit by a storm and lost several ships.'

'How big is his army?'

Beorn tossed the drumstick into the fire. 'Thirty thousand originally, mostly riff-raff scraped together without consideration of age or military experience. When Alexius heard about the invasion, he played a clever hand by forming an alliance with the Doge of Venice. The last thing the Doge wants is Normans controlling the approaches to the Adriatic. He took personal command of the Venetian fleet, caught the Norman ships napping and destroyed some and scattered the rest. Then he sailed into the harbour at Dyrrachium. When the Byzantine navy arrived, they joined with the Venetians and routed the blockading Norman fleet.'

'Not the most auspicious start to Robert's campaign.'

'There's more. Robert laid siege to the city, but it's well defended by *strategos* George Palaeologus.'

'I served under him in the east. As brave a commander as ever lived.'

'You're right. Not only has he held out against Robert's catapults and siege towers, he's also taken the fight to the enemy, mounting sallies from the city and destroying one of their siege

engines. During one assault, he took an arrow in the head and fought all day with the point lodged in his skull.'

'Palaeologus threatening the Normans' rear will make our task easier, even facing twice our number.'

'Less than that. Pestilence struck Robert's army in the summer and carried off five thousand men, including hundreds of his best knights.'

Vallon laughed. 'You almost make me sorry for the man. How strong is the Byzantine force?'

'About seventeen thousand. Five thousand from the Macedonian and Thracian *tagmata*, a thousand *excubitores* and *vestiaritae*, and a thousand Varangians. As well as the native troops and a regiment of Serbian vassals, we've got about ten thousand Turkish auxiliaries, most of them supplied by your old friend, the Seljuk Sultan of Rum.'

Vallon pulled a face. 'I wouldn't place too much faith in them.'

'Don't worry. The contest will be settled by the heavy cavalry and my Varangians. We've waited a long time to avenge our defeat at Hastings.'

'Do you know the battle plan?'

Beorn pointed towards the distant fires. 'Dyrrachium stands on a spit running parallel to the coast and separated from it by a marsh. The citadel's at the end of the spit, connected to the plain by a bridge. From what I gather, the emperor intends to send part of his force across the marsh to attack the Normans from behind. The rest of the army will hold the plain opposite the bridge.'

Vallon sipped his wine. 'I hear that Guiscard's son is his second-in-command.'

'Bohemund,' said Beorn. 'A big, brawling bastard and another first-rate soldier. And he isn't the only kin who'll be fighting at Guiscard's side. His wife Sikelgaita rides into battle with him.'

Vallon coughed. 'You're jesting.'

'It's true as I live. She's taller than most men and fiercer than a lion. A love-tussle with her would be something to remember.'

Vallon thought of his wife, Caitlin, herself a redoubtable woman of fiery temperament.

‘Have you any news of home?’

Beorn poured another cup. ‘Forgive me. I should have delivered it first. I dined at your house in August. Lady Caitlin grows more queenly each time I see her, and your daughters will have no difficulty making favourable matches. Aiken thrives in their company and his accomplishments grow daily.’

Three years before, Beorn had asked Vallon if he would take his then thirteen-year-old son into his household as the Frank’s squire or shield-bearer. Aiken’s mother was dead, and Beorn wanted his son to grow up learning to speak Greek and adopt Greek ways. The Anglo-Saxon Varangians still held to their own language and customs, even addressing the emperor in English. It wasn’t only Beorn’s pleas that had made Vallon accept. Caitlin had seen how lonely the boy was and pressed Vallon to take him under his wing. He would be the son that she hadn’t been able to give him.

Almost shyly, Beorn drew a letter from under his cloak and passed it across the flames.

Vallon read it and smiled. ‘Poor Aiken. He’s learning how to dance, with my eldest daughter as partner.’

‘It’s all right, isn’t it – a warrior learning how to turn a fancy step?’

‘Of course it is. Life isn’t only about shearing the heads off your enemy. In any case, dancing isn’t all that he’s mastering. He writes a good Greek hand and says that his tutors are pleased with his progress in mathematics and logic.’

Beorn jabbed a finger. ‘But soldiering is his birth destiny. He turned sixteen last month. When you ride out on your next campaign, you’ll take Aiken with you.’

Vallon hesitated. ‘Not all youths of sixteen have hardened to the same degree.’

Beorn leaned forward. ‘And some don’t harden until they’re tempered by the heat of battle. Promise me you’ll take Aiken on your next campaign. I know you won’t expose him to serious hazard until he’s ready to face it.’

‘I’d like to talk to him first, hear what ambitions he harbours.’

Beorn waved aside this consideration. ‘There’s only one course for my son – the way of the oath-sworn warrior. Give me your pledge, Vallon. In two days we march into battle. I might be killed. I’ll face that fate serenely if I know that Aiken will follow my calling.’

Vallon grimaced. ‘In two days it might be me who lies dead and then it will be my lady calling on you for protection.’

Beorn’s features set in complicated lines. He stared into the flames. ‘I’ve been waiting a long time for this encounter. I still feel shame that I didn’t die with my king at Hastings. This time we crush Duke Robert or perish in the attempt.’

Vallon reached out and touched Beorn’s shoulder. ‘That isn’t the attitude that wins battles.’

Beorn looked up, his eyes red in the firelight. He laughed. ‘You’ve always been the foxy one who lives to fight another day.’ He shot out a hand. ‘If I die, swear that you’ll make a warrior of Aiken.’

Vallon extended his own hand. ‘I swear it.’

Beorn sprang up and thumped him on the back. ‘I’ve kept you too long from sleep. You aren’t anxious about the battle, are you?’

‘Not particularly.’

Beorn gave a booming laugh. ‘Good. Fate always spares the undoomed warrior.’

Vallon managed a weak grin. ‘My old friend Raul the German used to say the same.’

Beorn looked down, his brutish face gentled. ‘And he spoke the truth.’

At break of day, Vallon led his squadron down to the Byzantine camp. Banners and standards glimmered through the dust kicked up by thousands of horses. Centurion Conrad met him at the outer rampart and guided him through the controlled chaos to the headquarters of the Grand Domestic, the emperor’s field marshal. A Greek general received Vallon with ill-concealed suspicion.

‘You cut it fine. You should have received your marching orders at the beginning of September.’

‘They reached me only two weeks ago, and the Pechenegs were so sorry to see us leave that they chased us halfway to Nicopolis.’

The general narrowed his eyes in the face of Vallon’s subtle insubordination. ‘I trust that your squadron is in fit shape to fight.’

Vallon knew there was no point explaining that his men and horses were exhausted. ‘I’ll carry out my orders diligently.’

The general’s slow, wagging nod conveyed a lack of conviction.

Vallon cleared his throat. ‘I request permission to scout the enemy’s positions. My squadron will be more effective if we know the lie of the land.’

The general kept Vallon under dark review. Like most native Byzantine commanders, he resented the fact that the empire’s defenders were largely made up of foreign mercenaries. ‘Very well. Make sure you’re back well before dark. After sunset the camp will be sealed. No one leaves, no one enters.’

‘Hear that?’ said Conrad as they left. ‘It must mean the emperor intends to give battle tomorrow.’

Vallon took his three centurions and a squad of horse archers on the reconnaissance, riding to a low ridge about a mile from the city. From here he could see the breaches pounded in the citadel’s walls by the Norman trebuchets. He could also make out the marshy channel through which the emperor intended sending part of his army.

‘If Alexius has thought of that ploy, you can be sure Guiscard has done the same. Gentlemen, I think we could be in for some hot action.’

He lingered a long time, committing the particulars of the terrain to mind. The season had been dry and the Byzantines had torched the fields to deny the invaders food, leaving a bare undulating plain ideal for cavalry.

He returned to the camp in a honeyed light and was still dismounting when Beorn ran up and seized his arm. ‘Come. The emperor’s holding his final council of war.’

They headed towards the double-headed eagle standard flying above the imperial headquarters, a large silk pavilion surrounded

by guards three lines deep. Another wall of guards sealed off a crowd of officers pressing around the inner cordon.

One of the guards held up his hand to stop Vallon.

‘The count’s with me,’ said Beorn, the wall of soldiers giving way before his bulk.

Vallon followed him through the scrum of officers, ignoring their black looks, until he had a clear view of the emperor. Alexius I Comnenus stood on a platform engaged in discussion with his senior commanders. Not at first sight a particularly imposing figure – pale face almost eclipsed by a bristling black beard, a chest like a pouter pigeon. Strip him of his crown and parade uniform – a corselet of gilt lamellar armour over a purple and gold tunic – and no one would guess his exalted rank and title.

Vallon recognised a few of the generals. The blond man wearing a tunic of madder red and a cloak fastened by a jewelled fibula at one shoulder was Nabites, the ‘Corpse Biter’, the Swedish commander of the Varangians. The portly man to his right was the Grand Domestic. One of the generals, lean, haggard and serious, seemed to be arguing with the emperor.

Vallon nudged Beorn. ‘That’s Palaeologus, commander of the citadel.’

‘Yes. He sneaked out of Dyrrachium when the emperor arrived and will make his way back tonight so that he can coordinate his attack on the Normans.’ Beorn rubbed his hands. ‘Everything’s running in our favour.’

Vallon saw Palaeologus step back and shake his head in vexation. ‘He doesn’t share your optimism.’

Alexius turned and looked out over the crowd, his piercing blue gaze transforming Vallon’s impression of the man. He raised a hand to command a hush, timing his delivery to perfection.

‘The talking is over, our tactics agreed. Rest well tonight, for tomorrow we drive the invaders into the sea.’ He smiled a disarming smile. ‘Unless any of you have something to add that might sway my decision.’

Gusty sighs of relief or anxiety gave way to a heavy silence.

Vallon didn't know he was going to speak until the words left his mouth. 'I see no compelling reason to risk battle.'

Beorn gripped his arm. Faces spun with expressions of disbelief. A general pushed out of the crowd, his face puce with anger. 'Who the hell are you to question His Imperial Majesty?'

'It wasn't a question,' said Vallon.

'The emperor's not interested in the opinion of some lily-livered mercenary.'

Alexius raised his jewelled baton. 'Let him speak,' he said in refined Attic Greek. He leaned forward, black brows arched in polite enquiry. 'And you are?'

'Count Vallon, commander of the Outlander squadron.' He spoke in clumsy demotic and heard men utter the word *ethnikos*, 'foreigner', seasoned with a selection of insulting epithets.

Alexius leaned further. 'Explain the reason for your timidity.' He wafted his baton to still the angry jostle around Vallon. 'No, please. I would like to hear the Frank's answer.'

'It's not cowardice that compels me to speak,' Vallon said. He could see a scribe recording his words. He dragged in breath. 'Winter approaches. In a month the Normans won't be able to advance even if they capture the city. Nor can they retire to Italy. They've already suffered serious setbacks – the destruction of their fleet, the ravages of plague. Most of their army are unwilling conscripts. Leave them to wither on the vine.'

Palaeologus was nodding and Alexius glanced round to intercept the meaningful glances of other commanders before turning back to Vallon. He gave every impression of a man open to argument. 'Some of my generals share your opinion.' His expression hardened, his voice rose and his blue gaze seared the audience. 'I'll tell you – all of you – what I told them.' He allowed a strained hush to settle before breaking it. 'It's true that the Normans have suffered reverses. If we withdraw, it's quite possible that they'll try to return to Italy for the winter. But next spring they'll be back, with a larger navy and army and the whole campaigning season in which to make gains. As for us, we've already withdrawn the

armies from our remaining holdings in Anatolia, leaving them exposed to attack by the Seljuks. No, now is when we're at our strongest. Now is the time to attack.'

Hundreds of fists punched the air around Vallon. The roar of salutations to the emperor spread until the Normans four miles away could have had no doubt that the order to battle had been given.

Beorn dragged Vallon away, sweeping aside an officer who clawed at the Frank and spat in his face. When Beorn was clear of the crush, he swung Vallon round. 'What the devil possessed you to fly in the face of the emperor? You just ended your career and ruined my chances of promotion to commander of the Varangians.'

'I spoke the truth as I saw it. As Palaeologus knows it from months of experience.'

Beorn's jaw jutted. His breath came in gusts. 'Fool. The truth is whatever the emperor wants it to be.'

Still panting in disbelief, he disappeared into the crowd, leaving Vallon isolated. A Byzantine officer barged into him and others leaned in with muttered remarks about his craven character. Face set, hand on sword, he set out to rejoin his squadron, unaware that fate had settled its indifferent glance on Beorn and that he would not speak to him again.

II

No moon on the eve of battle. Nothing visible except the hazy glow of Norman campfires burning around the city. Only the chink of metal and creak of horse harness told Vallon that his squadron were drawn up around him. Hooves pummelled the ground ahead and then stopped. He heard an exchange of passwords and after a little while Conrad arrived at his side.

‘You were right, Count. The Normans have left the city and advanced onto the plain.’

‘Send word back to the Grand Domestic.’

Mist lay thick along the coast and daylight was slow to break through, tantalising shapes swimming out of the murk and then retreating until at last the sun rose above the hills behind and the vapours lifted, revealing the Norman army arrayed in formations spanning a mile of plain, drawn up in perfect stillness, their banners limp and their mail armour leaden in the dim light. Behind them Vallon could see the fleet of blockading Venetian and Byzantine ships anchored outside the bay south of Dyrrachium.

The spine-tingling tramp of thousands of feet and hooves announced the approach of the Byzantine army. In battle-proven tradition it was drawn up in three main formations, with the emperor in the centre and a regiment led by his brother-in-law to his right. On the left, nearest to Vallon, was the *tagma* commanded by the Grand Domestic, his troops clad in glittering iron cuirasses and greaves and helmets with mail aventails protecting their necks, their horses skirted with oxhide scale armour and helmed with iron masks, so that men and beasts looked more like machines than flesh and blood. Vallon’s own men wore plain mail or leather armour rusted and stained by long exposure to the elements.

The imperial army halted in line with Vallon’s position, less than a mile from the Norman front. The Grand Domestic had posted Vallon’s squadron out on the left flank, close to the coast. Vallon’s intervention the night before had marked him out as too unreliable to occupy a more central position. He wasn’t concerned. His men were coursers and skirmishers. Whether the battle went well or badly, he might not see any action today. As Beorn had said, the encounter would be decided by the heavy cavalry and infantry.

A stirring in the Byzantine rear heralded the Varangian Guard arriving on horseback, their two-handed axes winking in the sunlight. They dismounted and formed into a square a hundred yards

in front of the emperor's standard. Grooms led their mounts away and a squadron of light cavalry cantered into the gap between the Varangians and the imperial centre. They were Vardariots, elite horse archers recruited from Christianised Magyars in Macedonia.

Priests blessed the regiments, the incense from their censers drifting across the plain. Vallon's squadron joined in the Trisagion, the Warriors' hymn. 'Holy God, Holy Mighty One, Holy Immortal One, have mercy on us' – his Muslim and pagan troopers singing as fervently as their Christian comrades.

Now the low autumn sun flashed off the lines of Normans and illuminated the brilliant standards borne by the Byzantine units. Vallon glanced at his own banner, its five triangular pennants stirring in the morning breeze. A bugle note prickled his blood. Trumpets blared and drums pounded, the notes resonating in his chest. With a shout that raised the hairs on his neck, the Varangians began their advance. The Normans' response drifted faint and eerie across the battlefield and above Vallon's head a flock of swallows heading south hawked for insects.

The Varangians swung along in full stride, singing their battle anthem, huge axes slung across their left shoulders, the shields on their backs redundant. Vallon couldn't suppress his admiration. Anxiety, too. How could infantry, however brave and skilled they might be, withstand a charge by mounted lancers? He pulled on his helmet, raised his hand and dropped it.

'Advance.'

They rode at walking pace, keeping level with the Varangians. When the distance between the two armies had narrowed by half, a detachment of Norman cavalry peeled off from the centre and charged the Varangians head on. The Guard halted, closing ranks.

'It's a feint,' said Vallon.

At a trumpet blast, the Varangian phalanx split in two, opening a corridor for the Vardariots. They galloped down it and when they reached the end they released their arrows at the cavalry before wheeling and riding back along the Varangians' flanks.

The square closed up again and resumed its advance. The Norman cavalry circled and made another charge, the Varangians and Vardariots countering with the same move as before. The Normans made one more feint and this time the Vardariots rode around the Varangians, discharging their arrows into the cavalry from a range of no more than fifty yards. Vallon saw riders tumble and horses go down.

‘That stung them,’ said Conrad.

Directly opposite Vallon’s position, Guiscard’s right wing urged their horses forward, spurring the beasts into a trot, angling across the battlefield.

‘Now it comes,’ said Vallon. Tight of throat, he watched the formation charge at an extended canter and then a gallop aimed at the Varangians’ left flank. The horse archers’ arrows couldn’t stop them. Vallon winced as the mass of horses ploughed into the Varangian formation, clutched his head when he saw it buckle, leaned forward on his stirrups when he saw the cavalry slow and begin to mill. Across the dusty arena the tumult of war carried – the clash of iron, the meaty impact of heavy axes smashing into flesh and bone, blood-crazed yells, the shrieks of injured beasts and dying men.

He sat back in his saddle. ‘They’re holding their ground.’

‘Skirmishing on the right,’ said Conrad.

Vallon’s attention flicked across the Byzantine front before returning to the grisly contest in the centre. The attack on the Varangians’ left flank had ground to a halt. Those terrible axes had wreaked havoc, throwing up a wall of dead horses. The cavalry couldn’t find a way through and while they wheeled and reared, the Vardariots poured arrows into them from close range.

Conrad turned. ‘Why doesn’t Guiscard throw his centre forward?’

Vallon rasped a knuckle along his teeth. ‘I don’t know. That’s what worries me.’

Unable to break the Varangian square, defenceless against the archers, the Norman cavalry wrenched their horses round and

began streaming away, at first in trickles and finally in a flood, kicking up dust that obscured the formations.

Vallon stood upright in his stirrups. 'No!'

Dim in the haze, the Varangians were pursuing their enemy, streaming like hounds after their hated foe. Vallon recognised Beorn by his vermilion beard, leading the reckless charge. Vallon kicked his horse and galloped towards the Grand Domestic's regiment, swinging his arm to signal that there was no time to lose. 'Follow them up!'

A few cavalymen glanced at him before turning their attention back to the action, as if it were a drama staged for their benefit.

Vallon spurred back to his formation. 'After them!' he shouted. 'Don't engage without my order.'

His squadron clapped spurs to flanks and galloped after the fleeing Normans and the pursuing Varangians. Here and there pockets of cavalry had turned on their enemy and were surrounded and cut down.

Conrad drew level. 'It's not a feint. It's a rout.'

Vallon pounded on. 'For now it is.'

And for a while it was. In the panic of war, the Norman right wing fled back to the sea. Some of them stripped off their armour and plunged in, trying to reach their ships. The rest milled along the shore, not knowing which way to turn. A detachment of Norman cavalry and crossbowmen cut between them and the Varangians, led by a figure with blonde hair spilling below her helmet. Back and forth she rode, smiting the cowards, exhorting the rabble to regroup and unite against the enemy.

'It's true,' said Vallon. 'That's Sikelgaita, Guiscard's wife.'

Her intervention turned the tide. In ones and twos and then in tens and twenties, the cavalry regrouped and turned. The Varangians were scattered over half a mile of plain. They had fought a brutal battle and followed up in heavy armour to exterminate the old enemy. They were formationless and exhausted, unable to offer any concerted defence against the Norman counter-attack.

Vallon watched the ensuing slaughter in furious disbelief. Time and time again, Beorn had told him how the Normans' feigned retreat at Hastings had lured the English shield wall to their destruction. And now it was happening again.

Conrad pranced alongside Vallon. 'We could make the difference.'

'No.'

Some of the Varangians, including Nabites their commander, managed to escape back to the Byzantine lines. Others fought their way through the Normans, gathering other survivors, making for a tiny, isolated chapel not far from the sea. By the time they reached the building, they must have numbered about two hundred – a quarter of the strength that had stepped out so bravely less than an hour before.

The chapel was too small to accommodate them and so many were forced to take refuge on its roof that the structure collapsed, casting them down among their comrades. Already the Normans were at work firing the building, piling brushwood around the walls and hurling burning brands over the eaves. Flames licked and then rose in smoky banners. Timbers crackled and Vallon heard the screams of men being consumed alive.

The door burst open and a dozen Varangians crashed out, led by Beorn, his beard scorched to stubble and his forehead blistered and boiled. He sliced through one Norman with a stroke that folded him over like a hinge before ten men hacked him down, flailing at his body as if he were a rat driven out of a rick at harvest time.

'Here comes Palaeologus,' said Conrad.

Out from the citadel rode its garrison. Almost immediately it met fierce opposition and the sally petered out.

'Too little, too late,' said Vallon.

A chorus of war cries heralded a charge by Guiscard's regiment at the emperor's exposed centre.

'Back!' yelled Vallon.

Led by Guiscard, the Norman cavalry bore down on the

imperial standard, sweeping aside the Vardariot archers who contested their path. Clumsy in their layers of armour, the imperial force lumbered forward to meet the attack, the two sides colliding with a splintering crash.

Swirling dust obscured the fighting. Vallon drove his horse towards the cloud, straining to make out the two sides.

‘The Normans have broken the centre,’ he shouted.

They had split the Byzantine formation, driving a deep wedge into it.

Vallon checked that his squadron was with him and pulled his horse to the left. ‘Closer! Keep formation!’

He aimed for the imperial standard, the only fixed point on the battlefield. But then he realised it wasn’t fixed. It had been reversed and was withdrawing. And over on the right flank another Byzantine formation was streaming away.

‘Treachery!’ Conrad shouted. ‘The Serbians are deserting.’

Nor were they the only ones. Behind the heavy Byzantine cavalry, the Seljuks – all ten thousand of them – turned tail and fled before they’d struck a single blow.

‘Calamity,’ Vallon groaned. ‘Complete disaster.’

‘Look out behind!’ Conrad yelled, hauling his horse round.

Vallon spun to see a squadron of Norman lancers plunging out of the dust, hauberks flapping about their legs, lances couched.

‘Stand and engage,’ he yelled. ‘Archers!’

With their first volley, they toppled more than ten of the enemy, the powerful compound bows driving arrows through plate and mail.

Vallon drew a mace. ‘Javelins!’

Scores of missiles arced towards the pounding cavalry. Few reached their target. And then the enemy was on them. Vallon singled out an individual riding pell-mell towards him. His attacker jounced in the saddle, only his lance held steady. Waiting until the last moment, Vallon swerved away from the point and, leaning out with his weight on his right stirrup, smashed his mace into the

Norman's mailed head with a force that sent him somersaulting backwards over his horse's tail.

Blood and brain splattered Vallon's hand. Eyes darting right and left, he weighed up the situation. Some of the Normans had charged right through his squadron and were disappearing into the dust. Others had drawn their swords to engage at close quarters. While most of the squadron fought hand to hand, the horse archers circled the fray, shooting at targets as they presented themselves. The assault by sword and dart was more than the Normans could deal with and they broke off, one of them wrenching his horse around so violently that it lost its footing and collapsed, toppling on the rider with a force that broke his leg and made him scream. Falling, his helmet toppled off and his coif slid down his neck. One eye clenched in agony, he registered Vallon's approach and his own execution.

Vallon leaned down and shattered his skull. 'Mercy on your soul.'

Short as it was, the skirmish had left him disoriented. The billowing dust made it impossible to make sense of what was happening. The only thing he knew for certain was that the Byzantines had lost the day. If the emperor was dead, they might have lost an empire.

He brandished his mace. 'Follow me!'

Less than half his squadron responded, the rest unsighted by the dust or scattered by the skirmish. Vallon didn't catch up with the main Norman force until they'd overrun the imperial camp, riding roughshod over the place where only last night Alexius had promised victory.

Giving the Normans a wide berth, Vallon's force outpaced the enemy. A distraught Byzantine cavalryman fleeing from the fray cut across his path.

'Where's Alexius? Is he alive?'

'I don't know.'

Vallon must have ridden a mile further before he came upon the Byzantine rearguard engaged in a desperate struggle to stem the

Norman pursuit. The task was beyond them. Their role was to bear down on the enemy in close formation and crush them by weight of arms and armour. In retreat, that beautifully crafted material – the plated corselets, greaves, arm- and shoulder-bands – weighed twice as much as Norman mail, reducing them to lumbering targets.

Vallon rode through them and at last overtook a group of stragglers from the Imperial Guard. He drew level with an officer.

‘Does the emperor live?’

The officer pointed ahead and Vallon spurred on, overtaking friend and foe alike. The Normans were so desperate to catch Alexius that they barely registered the Frank’s passing until one of them, strappingly built, mounted on a particularly fine horse and wearing the sash of a senior commander, heard Vallon shout an order in French and steered towards him.

‘You’re a Frank. You must be regretting this day’s employment.’

Vallon dug in his spurs. ‘Fortunes of war.’

The knight couldn’t match his pace. ‘What’s your name?’

‘Vallon.’

‘Not so fast, sir.’

Vallon cocked an eye back to see the man raise his helmet, revealing a handsome, ruddy face.

‘I’m Bohemund. If you survive the slaughter, apply to me for a position. You’ll find me in the palace at Constantinople.’

Vallon booted his horse on. The mob of horsemen ahead of him thinned to reveal a core of the Imperial Guard bunched around a horseman accoutred in splendid armour and quilted silk. About fifty Norman cavalry were trying to force their way through the cordon. Vallon galloped up behind them, slung his shield over his back, holstered his mace and drew both his swords – the beautiful Toledo blade he’d taken off a Moorish captain in Spain, the sabre-like paramerion slung at his left hip. The exultant and single-minded Normans never expected to be attacked from behind and didn’t see him coming. Trained since childhood to wield weapons either-handed, he rode between two of the trailing

Normans, dropped his reins and cut down first one and then the other in the space of a heartbeat.

The audacious attack unbalanced him. He had to discard the paramerion in order to recover his seat and reins. He was no longer a limber youth and he wouldn't be trying that move again.

A Norman officer signalled with violent gestures and a dozen mailed horsemen converged on Vallon. He glanced back to see how many of his squadron were still with him. Not more than twenty.

'Hold them up,' Vallon shouted. His eye fell on Gorka, a Basque commander of five. 'You. Stay close.'

Now the ground ahead was almost clear and Vallon could see that the Normans had broken through the emperor's defensive screen. Three of them attacked the emperor simultaneously from the right. Alexius, mounted on the finest horse gold could buy, couldn't avoid their weapons. One of the Normans planted his lance in the horse's leather-shielded flank. The other two drove their weapons into the emperor's side, the force of the impact pitching him to the left at an angle impossible to sustain.

Fifty yards adrift, helpless to intervene, Vallon waited for the emperor to fall. *So ends the empire.*

But Alexius didn't fall. His right foot had become entangled in the stirrup and somehow he managed to cling on. Two more Normans charged in from the left to deliver the killing strike. They aimed with deliberation, both lances taking Alexius in the left side of his ribcage.

If Vallon hadn't seen it himself, he wouldn't have believed it. Like the previous attack, the points didn't penetrate the armour. Instead, the force of the blows jolted the emperor back into the saddle and he rode on, three lance shafts dangling from man and mount, the iron heads trapped between the lamellar plates.

Vallon didn't see the final attempt on the emperor's life until it was too late. A Norman angled across him, spiked mace held high, determined to win glory. Lashing his horse into greater effort,

Vallon strove to catch up. The emperor turned his bloody face as the Norman drew back his mace to crush it.

Gorka shot past with sword angled behind his shoulder. 'He's mine,' he shouted, and sent the Norman's head bouncing over the plain with one mighty swipe.

Vallon had outstripped the enemy and the river was less than a quarter of a mile away. He drew alongside the emperor. Blood flowed from a wound in Alexius's forehead.

'Cross the river and you'll be safe.'

Alexius raised a hand in acknowledgement and Vallon pressed close to the emperor. Together they crashed into the river and forged through the current. On the other side a Byzantine force large enough to repel the Norman pursuit coalesced around the emperor. Men who just a short time ago had thought only of their own lives lifted Alexius to the ground, exulting at his deliverance. Surgeons hurried forward to treat him. A piece of his forehead hung in a bloody flap. Vallon dismounted and stood back while the surgeons did their work.

An officer hurried past and clapped him on the back. 'Praise the Lord. The emperor will live.'

Vallon recognised the man who'd spat in his face the night before. After the hideous events of the day, reason snapped. He shot out an arm, seized the man and yanked him round. 'No thanks to you,' he said. And then, swamped by emotion, he slapped the man to the ground and stood over him, sword poised. 'Easy to prate about courage and honour in camp. Not so easy to convert words into action in the face of battle-hardened warriors who don't give a shit about your noble lineage.'

The officer struggled to his feet, drawing his sword. Vallon swatted it aside and crashed his shield against the officer's head, knocking him down again.

'Get up if you dare.'

Hands seized Vallon and dragged him away. A Greek soldier drew back his sword to strike.

'Stop this,' a voice shouted. 'Unhand that man.'

Into Vallon's view rode a Byzantine general, casting his gaze around. 'One of the mercenary captains assisted the emperor in his escape. Let him step forward.'

Vallon smiled at the officer he'd assaulted and shoved his sword back into the scabbard. 'I think he means me.'

When Vallon approached, Alexius raised his blanched face and laughed. 'I might have known it. It seems that you only came to my aid to tell me your judgement was vindicated.'

Vallon bowed. 'Not so. Your tactics would have worked if the Varangians hadn't suffered a rush of blood. I give thanks to God for sparing your life, and I pledge to continue serving in defence of the empire.'

Alexius pinned him with his disconcerting blue gaze, then allowed the surgeons to lower him back onto his cushions. He rotated one hand and closed his eyes. 'Vallon the Frank. Make a note of that name and strike everything else from the record.'