

***Summary: Set during England's 14th century invasion of France, Welsh minstrel Dafydd ap Gwilym accompanies his patron Edward the Black Prince into France. He becomes embroiled in conspiracies while employing the services of the enigmatic mercenary Radu the Black of Transylvania who hunts a mysterious adversary known only as the Nachtzehrer.***

Thomas de Beauchamp, The Earl of Warwick, struggled to have his words heard over the rising tumult.

“Reign in, damn you! Fall back and regroup at the line! Are you so simple and starved of senses?” The Irish and Welsh surged forward, heedless of their commander’s words.

Behind him, Sir Richard Talbot laughed out loud. “Look at them Warwick, just look at them! Fucking Irish!”

Earl Warwick did look and realized the matter was beyond him now. They want of meat, wine and chattels. They see poorly defended houses and abandoned stalls. The Abbey doors will be boarded up and the nobles will be well protected, but the common folks are lambs fit for slaughter, may God have mercy upon them!

Warwick watched as some Irish Gallowglass, easily recognizable by their colorful Gaelic garb worn over supple aketons, crashed through a hastily erected barricade of carts. Wooden logs and crates salvaged from the Odon River docks by desperate townsfolk were split apart by the Irish assault as though they were haystacks. They had been a laughably poor defense. The Gallowglass hacked and chopped through them unmindful of the damage this did to their own blades. No knight would have so dulled his sword, Warwick thought scornfully.

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The sun was beating down mercilessly, but the breeze borne off the Odon river was the hot breath of Hell itself. The stink of blood, shit and death hit the two English knights like a hammer each time the wind rose.

Scouts came and went delivering Warwick's orders and relaying them, ineffectually, to the disorganized horde below. The preparation of an entire night had been tossed aside in a matter of minutes and now chaos reined in Caen.

“By Saint Georges’s Spurs my Lord, have you ever seen the like? God, was my sword not glutted with enough of this Irish blood when they sprang upon us when we were at Dornock?” Talbot, his expensive half-plate armor clanking with each movement, reigned his horse close to Warwick’s own steed and looked down to the battling men, mostly Welsh and Irish regulars. His disgust for what he deemed the ‘lesser peoples’ was well known to Warwick.

Warwick grunted. His own preeminent distaste for the Irish was borne of memories of their hit and run tactics during the Scottish Campaigns, the battle of Dornock amongst them. By God that had been a nightmare! Now a few of the northern clans, O’Neill and McMahon amongst them, had sworn to fight for King Edward...as long as it suited them. They had all the obedience of rabid dogs. And they are not the worst of the lot.

“Here comes Northampton,” Talbot smirked, pointing at a horse approaching up the hill at a cantor. “Undoubtedly to suggest the gallows idea again after seeing this rubbish. Quick, look suitably put out.”

Warwick sighed privately and kept his face impassive, not wanting Talbot to see how much he really was put out. The Earl of Northampton was dressed in his full suit of half-plate and mail armor, its filigree of gold and silver worked in stylized etchings catching the light of the sun. Several hundred florins undoubtedly squandered on designs that a well placed mace or

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sword blade could easily ruin, but that was just another way Northampton flaunted the wealth he enjoyed from sizable rents collected across the midlands of England. The standard of his house was born aloft by a young page wearing only Northampton regalia over a simple smock. The gangly youth riding behind his Lordv had the look of a lad well out of his element. I wonder how many pages Northampton will go through on this campaign? The Scotts murdered eight of them as I recall. The fucking fool should at least give them a helmet and some chain mesh, he can bloody afford it. He winced. I've been around Talbot too long. Christ forgive my vulgarity!

“A Gallows my Lords!” Northampton shouted up at them to be heard above the tumult. “Hang six or seven of them dead center of camp and by God you will have order then! Aye, that's how we do it on my Irish lands!”

Talbot looked over his shoulder at Warwick and rolled his eyes. Warwick ignored him and responded kindly.

“Aye William, but surely not dead center? The flies man!”

“Ha! Flies won't be a bother with this lot. Their hides already have maggots crawling around inside of them. Lice bitten curs! Good day to you Sir Talbot.” Northampton nodded in greeting to the favored knight.

“My Lord Earl,” Talbot said bowing slightly in his saddle. “The Count seems to have left his door open and thrown the Frenchy masses to the Wolves of Summer. His Majesty will get his wish and there shall be no siege methinks.”

“That French peacock Compte d'Eu is probably holed up with the rest of them on the island. Undoubtedly with the rest of the noble fleur de lis.” Talbot added with a sneer. Talbot shared his King's distaste for the French enthusiastically.

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“Agreed.” Warwick had already discerned that was what was happening from reports he had already received from his forward scouting parties. The Count or Comte d’Eu and the rest of the Caenish nobility had seen to their own protection well enough. Trusting to its newer, stronger walls, the Inner City, built upon the bank of the River Orne, was highly defensible as compared to the outer, older city with its crumbling walls and much larger areas to cover.

Warwick supposed he may have done the same in Count Eu’s position, but not without a fight! He had been expecting archers on the walls, pikeman lined up behind rough stockades and captains giving orders to repel and to hold. To find a pitiable defense of a few determined peasants desperate to protect their homes and businesses with nary a high born gentleman to lead them was...unthinkable.

Those peasants now floated belly up or face down in the river below. They had died screaming for Christ’s mercy. Spurred onward by easy loot and mayhem, England’s armies were becoming uncontrollable.

I am in danger of agreeing with Northampton for once. These Irish and Welsh need reigning in. Speaking of which...

“I say William...” Warwick turned his horse towards Northampton who was looking with distaste into the corpse-choked river below. “That Welsh minstrel who accompanies the Prince. Was he not with you earlier? He mentioned something about composing a song about the battle?”

“Ah, that Gwilym fellow, aye. He was with me this morning. I was recounting my family history so that he might be persuaded to compose a song about my lineage. I thought it unseemly at first that the Prince should keep a Welsh born minstrel in his retinue, but at least he

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is of noble stock himself. As least as far as that goes in Wales, eh Thomas? Ha! I could not say where he has gotten to.”

“Indeed. No matter.” Warwick spurred his horse about and trotted back down the hill with Talbot and Northampton keeping slightly behind. Warwick debated whether he should enter the city or not. He would have to send terms of surrender across the Orne to the new city as soon as the Abbey fell. Perhaps in that instance a little mayhem could be of benefit? A good leader had to know how to turn an incident into an advantage and Warwick had risen far by knowing how to examine a problem from all sides and implement satisfactory solutions. The King would see things his way.

“Wait, who the devil is that?” Talbot suddenly exclaimed.

Northampton and Warwick turned to regard where Talbot was pointing. A large group of men could be seen running pellmell into the city via a large gap in the stone wall that sappers had successfully breached hours before. Warwick was certain he had placed men there to guard it, but only against people from escaping, not entering. He squinted and recognized the standard the riders were flying and he scowled.

“The worst of the lot. Damnation! Talbot get your men in order. I am entering the city. William, there may be something to a gallows after all!”

Talbot was still squinting against the sun’s glare trying to make out the standard. It was a yellow background with a black bird of some sort clasping a red colored sword. “I don’t recognize that house?”

“Fucking mercenaries!” Warwick swore aloud in response as he spurred his horse to a gallop.