

Rumours of War

It was an hour past dawn when a single scream came from inside the town. A moment later there was a second cry, cut off as sharply as a thread being snipped—or a throat being cut. The two men who lay in the tall grass on the treeless knoll overlooking Sheffield did not flinch at the sound.

They had been shadowing the mercenary army on its slow march north from Nottingham for over a week and such sounds had become commonplace. As Prince John's Flemish and Irish hirelings entered each village along their route, they helped themselves to whatever they fancied. When a place was being pillaged, screams were the order of the day.

Sheffield was clustered around the outside bend of the River Don with a timbered palisade atop a motte at the town's centre. That fortress would not have lasted three days against the rams and trebuchets in the army's siege train and so the locals had bowed to the inevitable, opened their gates and hoped for the best.

Those hopes were not realized. From the hill above the town, the two men watched as some of the more prudent inhabitants fled at the mercenaries' approach. Those who stayed would regret that decision—if they lived. Meeting no resistance, the outriders of the army entered the town, and the screaming began.

The men who entered Sheffield had spent six long months laying siege to the castle at Nottingham. The town that clustered beneath that fortress had been picked clean long ago and the men were eager for new plunder—and Sheffield was untouched. But no longer. For two days the men on the hill kept watch as the mercenaries drunkenly took their liberties with the town. At dawn on the third day, wisps of smoke still rose amid the charred remains of burnt buildings. From their hilltop, the hidden watchers could see a dead horse in its paddock at the edge of town and bodies in the surrounding fields ripening in the August heat. The single scream that had broken the morning calm was the only sign that anyone was stirring in the town below.

After a time, the larger of the two men on the hill plucked a blade of grass and began to chew on it. Magnus Rask was a tall, broad-shouldered man with thick bands of muscle across his upper back—a sure sign of long practice with a bow. He had a golden braid tied in back with a bit of rawhide and looked every inch the Dane that he was. He rolled toward the burly monk beside him. He'd got to know Father Augustine well in the months they had fought together to hold the castle at Nottingham and had come to appreciate both the nimble mind and the sword arm of this friar they called Tuck.

"I think their all dead drunk," he said with disgust. "Two hundred men could walk in there and butcher the lot of them before they woke."

"We've only got eighteen," Tuck reminded him, dryly, "and this lot might be sober by the time we fetched Robin and the lads from Sherwood."

Rask gave a noncommittal grunt. When the mercenary army had moved north, they had watched it from the edge of the forest. There were well over two thousand men in the column and they'd counted thirteen siege engines loaded on wagons and hauled by teams of oxen. There was no other force in the land to match it.

Rask scratched himself idly and sat up. Tuck did the same, there being little chance that the drunken rabble in the village would notice two men sitting on the hill. Rask had an intricately carved silver ring around one huge arm and a short sword at his side. Resting across his lap was a longbow made of yew.

Viking, thought Tuck.

Magnus Rask had once been Master of the Sword for Sir Thomas of Loxley. He had trained the young Robin of Loxley in sword and longbow and, with Sir Thomas dead, had given his loyalty without hesitation to his master's son. Tuck had followed them both, along with fifteen others, over the wall of Nottingham Castle the night before the surrender of the fortress. Had they stayed, they would have had a choice—swear fealty to Prince John or face the gibbet. They chose to go.

By the dark of the moon they had climbed ropes from the south wall of the fortress to the top of the steep bluff that plunged another two hundred feet into the River Leen. It was a miracle that none of them died on that rocky slope in the pitch dark. Once down, they slid into the shallows of the river and slipped unseen through the cordon of enemy troops.

Their refusal to bend a knee to John had made them outlaws in these parts, so they'd struck north to the favoured refuge of such men—the ancient forest of Sherwood. Outlaws they might be, but they still had their honour—and their heads.

As Tuck and Rask continued to watch the town, they heard a whoop from inside the cluster of hovels that clung to the outside of the fortress palisade like piglets around a sow. A girl burst from one of the narrow lanes and ran like mad straight toward the hill where they sat. She had gathered up her skirt and her long white legs flashed in the morning light. Behind her, five men came streaming out of the alleyway like a pack of hounds on a hare.

For a bit, it looked as though she would simply outrun the lot as she cut through a field of ripe barley. The men who shouted and hooted behind her were stumbling over the uneven ground, but one man, who looked to be hardly more than a boy, was gaining rapidly on the girl.

Tuck sighed. He was a practical man and had steeled himself to the sights and sounds of terror as this foreign plague moved north from Nottingham. He knew that two men alone could not save the unfortunate folk caught in the path of destruction. Robin had sent them to watch and report on where this pack of Irish and Flemish war dogs would turn next and that is what they had done.

But the march north had stalled here in Sheffield. The mercenaries appeared to be going nowhere and he had reached the end of his patience. He looked at Rask and rose to his feet. Rask arched an eyebrow and waited to see what the monk would do next. Tuck drew his short sword just as the girl in the field below let out a curse that carried in the still air to the top of their hill.

Rask leapt to his feet, an eager smile on his lips. He drew five arrows from his quiver.

“We keep one alive,” Tuck insisted, “long enough to tell us why they are just sitting there in Sheffield.”

Rask grunted an acknowledgement and set off down the hill at a lope. Tuck gathered the hem of his brown robe in his free hand and ran to catch up. They reached the bottom of the hill as the rest of the baying pack converged on the girl. The young soldier had caught her and pinned her to the ground, the golden stalks of barley smashed down around them. His companions were hooting and urging him on.

The girl had not given up. She managed to get one hand free and clubbed the boy's left ear with a closed fist. For a moment he drew back, surprised and stunned that the girl had struck him. In that moment, she drove her other fist into his groin, doubling him over in pain. Groaning, he rolled off her. The girl immediately seized the opportunity and scrambled to her feet. Before she could take a step, one of the four remaining pursuers grabbed her arm and drew back his fist.

But the blow never came. For a moment it looked as though the man had frozen with his fist cocked. He gave an odd grunt and lowered his arm, a look of confusion on his face. He reached around his body with his other hand and pawed at his side. Only the feather fletching

of the longbow shaft showed where it had entered there. He tried to say something to his fellows but blood frothed at his mouth and he toppled face first into the barley.

The three mercenaries still standing in the field looked up to see a tall man fifty paces away with a bow in his hand. They were veterans of many campaigns and knew what a bow could do to men standing in the open with no shields. They began to back away from the girl and would have run, but then they saw the big man drop his bow and draw a short sword. A burly monk had come up beside the bowman and he also carried a sword.

With no bow in play, the odds had shifted. The younger man had managed to stagger to his feet, though he was still bent forward at the waist and clutching at his crotch. Three of the men drew swords and one slid a long dirk from his boot. The girl was forgotten as they fanned out and edged toward the two intruders who had interrupted their fun and killed their comrade.

Unexpectedly, the tall man and the monk began to lope across the field to meet them, looking for all the world like wolves about to fall on a flock of sheep. The mercenaries stopped their advance and cast uneasy glances at each other. For months men and women had fled at their approach. No one in the villages had dared to raise a hand to them. Now these men were coming at them on the run.

But there were only two...

Magnus Rask increased his speed to a near sprint, his long legs eating up the ground. He headed straight for a beefy man on the far right of the line. The big Dane raised his sword and the man braced to parry, but the blow didn't come. Rask pivoted left and lunged at the man next to him. The move was so sudden his victim could not bring his own sword into play. He feebly flung out his left arm in defence. It did not stop the point of Rask's blade from slicing into the base of his neck. The man fell like a puppet whose strings had been cut.

Tuck was cursing to himself for not keeping up with the long-limbed Rask as he came across the barley field. He would have to pray to St. Bernard to forgive his blasphemy when his work here was done. He noticed that the youngest man in the group, the one the girl had struck was standing stiffly, the discomfort still with him.

You're lucky. You, I'll let live.

He fainted toward the boy who lurched backwards, falling on his backside, then turned on the man next to him. This one was no novice swordsman and, whatever the effects of the drink he'd had the night before, the sight of a man coming at him with a blade and death in his eyes sharpened his focus.

Tuck came forward slowly, rolling up the sleeve on his sword arm as he came. The man saw a tracery of white scars there, but his eyes were fixed on the monk's blade that moved in a slow weave. The mercenary watched him like a bird watches a snake. Tuck moved closer and the man lunged.

He thought the stocky monk would be slow, but his blade found nothing but air. He whirled to find Tuck had danced off to his right, still moving his blade as though to entrance him. The man was Irish and a fair swordsman. He had made a good living killing men with his blade, but now he felt a chill in his spine. He had never faced someone like this monk. The man in the brown robe moved faster than seemed possible for his age and girth. The Irishman leapt at Tuck and took a wide sweeping stroke, but all his blade found were a few stalks of barely.

He swung around in a panic to find the monk closing in. His fear was now a cold knot in his stomach. Sweat coursed down his face and stung his eyes. In desperation he charged at the monk, attempting to close with his tormentor and negate the man's fearful speed. But he was off balance and too slow. His world went black as Tuck sidestepped and slammed the hilt of his sword into the man's temple.

At the other end of the line the beefy man had watched the man next to him go down in a welter of blood and now saw another of his comrades clubbed to the ground by a monk. Of the men who had chased the wench into the field, he was the only one left standing. He thought of running, but he would never make it to the safety of the village before the big man retrieved his longbow.

He would have to stand and fight, but now this blonde giant with the bloody blade was coming for him. His throat was dry and he wished for one more gulp of the fine ale they had found the night before. He looked into Rask's eyes and shuddered at what he saw there. He wished they'd never found the damn girl!

He came forward swinging his blade hard—too hard. The big Dane simply stepped back as the man's stroke whistled by his nose six inches short of its mark. He stepped forward, driving his blade up under the soldier's ribs. The man gave a strange whining cry then twitched twice before hitting the ground. Rask wrenched his blade free and drove it into the earth to clean the blood. It had all taken less than a minute.

He turned to see the final soldier, the boy who had pinned the girl, rise from his posterior and lunge at Tuck from behind with his sword. His shout of warning died in his throat as the boy flung his arms out and crumpled to the ground, a blade protruding from his back.

It was the girl. She had found a fallen sword and put it to good use. She stood over the boy waiting to see if he would move. He didn't. She kicked the lifeless body then looked around, unsure of what to do. For the first time since she had burst from the alleyway, nothing moved in the barley field. Tuck looked anxiously at the town, but nothing stirred there. They had killed quietly and quickly. There had been no clash of steel to alert the town. He glanced at the girl, who looked more angry than frightened. He returned his sword to his scabbard and gently took her arm. She jumped, but then settled as he spoke gently to her.

"You can't go back, miss."

She looked back at the little town of Sheffield and slowly nodded her head.

"Never liked the place anyway," she whispered.

"Very well then," Tuck said, glancing once more at the town. "We should go now."

The girl nodded and let the monk lead her back toward the hill that loomed above the barley field. Rask caught up with them.

"The one you clubbed—he's still breathing. Shall I drag him along?"

Tuck stopped.

"We still need to know why they are not moving, Magnus. Do you think his skull is split or is he just out."

Suddenly the girl spoke up.

"I know why they don't move."

The two men looked at her and Tuck cocked his head and gave the girl a gentle smile.

"And what is your name, my dear?"

The girl managed a small smile in return.

"It's Marian, Father. Thank you for killing those men."

"Ah, it was no trouble at all child—and thank you for doing your part." He jerked his head back toward the bodies in the field. "That boy might have split me if you hadn't done him first."

"They were pigs," she said with disgust.

Tuck shook his head sadly.

"They were men, miss, and some of them are worse than pigs. Now tell us why the mercenaries are still here in Sheffield."

Marian told.