

Excerpt from A Question of Honour

Patch, John Blackthorne and Sergeant Billy began rousing the men two hours before first light. The sky overhead was cloudless and full of stars, promising another clear day. Breakfasts were cooked over banked fires to avoid alerting watchers on the walls to this early morning muster, though there was little doubt the French defenders inside the town knew an assault was coming.

In the distance, trebuchets kept up their barrage of stones aimed at the newly-formed breach to prevent defenders from barricading the gap with rubble and timbers during the night. A few desultory stones arced back over the walls as the defenders tried to answer the enemy bombardment.

In the Invalids' camp, men began to don mail and look to their weapons. Roland saw the huge Scot, Seamus Murdo, drawing a whetstone over the blade of his long-handled axe and recalled the big man's bull-like charge that forced open the gate at Deganwy. He would want Murdo in the first rank with him when they stormed the wall.

He saw Brother Cyril moving from campfire to campfire, offering blessings and prayers for the faithful and the few non-believers as well. At such a time there weren't many who did not look to God for strength or solace. Declan came to stand beside Roland as the Invalids made ready.

"Will it be as bad as Acre, I wonder?" he said idly.

"God only knows," said Roland, "but it won't be good. Of that I'm certain."

Declan laughed.

"Thank you for the encouragement," he said and threw an arm around Roland's shoulders. "Makes me wish I was chasing a few cow thieves back across the Dee."

"And I'd be happy to be behind a plough at Danesford about now," Roland said with a smile, "but first this."

Declan withdrew his arm and drew his broadsword.

"Aye, let's get this done and over."

Behind them the Invalid Company began to gather on the dusty road.

It was still dark when the Invalids began to file into the siege tower that had been rolled up to within a dozen feet of the city wall during the night. Inside the tower were flights of broad wooden steps leading up five levels, the last being a fortified firing position atop the tower for the crossbowmen. On the fourth level was the heavy wooden ramp that would drop to span the gap between the tower and the top of the city wall. The outside of the tower was clad in oak planks and covered in vinegar-soaked hides should the defenders try to ignite the structure. As the Invalids packed into the confined space shoulder-to-shoulder, one of the new men spoke up.

"This is better than the breach," he said, as though trying to convince himself.

"Oh, aye, lad, goin' into a breach is bad," Sergeant Billy observed dryly, "but have ye ever seen one of these towers burn? They go up like a bonfire—tower, men and all. Or sometimes they hook it with grappling irons and pull it down smashing it to kindling..."

"Hush, Billy," Patch ordered, sensing the unease behind the newcomer's bravado.

Black humour was normally welcome at such times, but he did not want the new men spooked. As they moved up the stairs inside the tower, a chill wind blew in from the west, causing the tall wooden tower to groan and sway as the men inside crowded together, waiting for the ramp to fall. It was dark as a pit inside the tower even though dawn was beginning to show above the walls of Gamaches.

On both sides of the city's wall men waited for the attack to begin. Those new to war felt their mouths go dry and their bowels turn to liquid while veterans wondered if this battle would be better or worse than ones they'd fought before. White knuckles gripped sword hilts and spear shafts tighter as time slowly passed.

Then, off to the right, came the muffled sounds of cheering, punctuated by the clash of steel on steel as Mercadier's men charged into the breach on the opposite side of the city's massive southwestern gate. Atop the tower, Genoese crossbowmen searched for targets along the wall walk but could find few clean shots. From high atop the gate barbican, fire arrows arced through the dim morning light to strike the sides of the tower, sputtering out against the soaked cow hides that protected the wood.

The Invalids were jammed four abreast on the stairs, filling the tower to capacity with forty of their number waiting outside the rear entrance for the order to advance. On the third level, Patch could just make out the faces of the men nearest him and they looked grim. The one-eyed soldier barked out a question.

"Are ye ready, lads?"

A few half-hearted "ayes" came back and he scowled.

"Why, I thought this was the damned Invalid Company!" he intoned, shaking his head sadly. "The one our drunken countrymen sing about in the taverns! We'll see now if yer good fer somethin' more than tavern songs!"

He paused for a long moment as men around him hung their heads.

"Have ye not whipped the Flemings?" he shouted, banging the flat of his sword on his shield.

"Aye!" some men called back.

"And the Saracens?"

"Aye!" came from more men and louder this time.

"Welshmen?"

"Aye!" The sound was rising to a roar.

"Even our very own Englishmen?"

"Aye! Aye! Aye!" they chanted.

He stood before them and flipped up the black patch over his left eye, revealing the empty socket there.

"We are the cripples!" he roared. "The unwanted, the unlamented," he shouted, as the answering roar grew. "We are a company of the damned. We are the Invalid Company and, by God, no poxy Frenchmen can stand against us!"