

October 14, 1066

Grimbaldus looked up. The sky was milky with stars: more than he could begin to count. Somewhere there was a message for him in those lights, if he could just figure out what it was. He already knew that this day was to be one of destiny, not only from the obvious preparations for battle, but by the very presence of the comet.¹ Its head had already sunk below the horizon, and its two tails were almost down too.²

Its first tail had grown for months as the preparations had been made. Only recently had the second tail shown up. Grimbaldus was no astrologer, but he knew that such a star in motion was a clear sign that his world was about to change. The second tail was perplexing: he took it to mean the two kings competing for the same throne. Yet the same sky rose that night over the Saxons too. What message was for him? What message was for them? For now, he had more important things to think about. He figured that if he lived through the next day he would have lots of time to ponder about the stars. He also figured that whatever the stars might say, God must surely be behind it. He looked down again and resumed his penitence. He said a special prayer to St. Grimbald, on whose day³ he had been born and who, a hundred years before, had come to England for the greater glory of God and of Normandy.⁴

Grimbaldus and the other knights had determined to spend the night in prayer. Many of the archers and foot soldiers stood in silent vigil as well. His cousin, the Earl of Warren knelt in their midst. How far he and William had come from playing at combat as children on his father's estate in Normandy,⁵ to this hillside in the land of the Saxons! They were on the verge of a new empire. William had always claimed that he was supposed to be the king as Edward had promised. God, this army, and the comet were about to determine whether he was right.

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Grimbaldus had been on a foraging trip the night before when the herald had arrived breathless with the news. Harold was marching south with $\overline{\text{VMMM}}$ ⁶ men. This was the battle they had come for. There was no question of readiness for the day—he had dreamt of it since eight months before when Harold had proclaimed himself king. William had announced his plan and Grimbaldus had eagerly offered himself in knight service. Even when all was ready for the invasion, the army had waited weeks for the favorable wind that would carry them swiftly across the channel from the Somme. For as many weeks again the army had waited, reinforcing their entrenchments at Pevensey, ultimately abandoning the ancient Roman fort for better terrain from which the $\overline{\text{VMM}}$ ⁷ Norman, Breton, and Flemish soldiers and their horses could move, march, and if necessary, defend the retreat from the peninsula. That terrain was northwards up the shore, at the village of Hastings.

One by one the knights and foot soldiers had visited through the night with the clergy for absolution and blessings in the face of possible death before the next sunset. For over an hour Bishop Odo himself had blessed the thousand Norman knights one at a time under the papal banner.⁸ Then Odo conducted mass for the larger throng. The silent prayers of the larger gathering began to vocalize and then to merge. William spoke briefly to the men of destiny, of courage, and of the simple battle plan for the day, and then asked the Bishop to lead them in prayer.

The army incanted the rosary and quietly filtered into columns for the march to meet the Saxon. Mile after mile they stretched, marching in the darkness as the stars were gradually veiled by the first rays of dawn. The scouts and messengers hurtled forward to assess the enemy position. As the sun broke clear of the horizon the news came that the Saxon had been sighted only ten stadia⁹ ahead. As the Norman column broke in steady march over the knoll, the English army came into view.

Harold had already formed his troops ten rows deep and one hundred fifty rods¹⁰ long, straddled across the intersection of two roads. The wall of shields was complete, a thousand warriors wide. Ahead lay the road to London. Across it lay the only road which would allow the

Normans to flank to either side from the peninsula. It was a wise but unnecessary precaution. William had no intention of flanking. London was his goal. Harold had positioned his troops ten rods from the peak of the long knoll, allowing the king to see the entire battlefield, forcing the Normans to fight uphill.¹¹

William surveyed his options. He could position his troops on the opposing side of the valley and force the battle into the sandy bog at the bottom, or he could cross the bog immediately, and force the battle onto the dry but sloping ground. William remembered the landing three weeks ago and the first deployment of the army at Pevensey, when his knights were forced to dismount and walk beside their horses due to the poor footing. His archers had to aim upwards anyway...

Grimbaldus wasn't surprised. His cousin had never flinched before. Why should his moment of destiny be any different? To Harold's amazement, the Norman invaders continued their march and deployed squarely in front of him, one stadium's length down the slope. Harold made his first mistake of the day, and elected to wait in order to try to pin all the Normans in the valley for a total slaughter, rather than interrupting their orderly deployment with an immediate charge. If he decapitated the column, the large numbers out of his reach in the trailing line might flee, only to come back at some future date to haunt him.

By nine o'clock the Normans had assembled their battle formation. The Bretons were on the left, the Normans were in the center, and the Flemish were on the right. In each formation, over a stadium's length of archers lined up several men deep. Behind them were the heavy-armored infantry, then the knights, and then the reserves and baggage guard, the latter many rods behind the stream. Across from them the few Saxon archers were all but lost in the homogenous fyrd¹² behind the wall of shields. The Saxons were fronted by two rows of the elite huscarles, wielding double-edged battle axes and light armor.¹³ The huscarles also protected the king in a tight knot marked by the royal standards, only three rods behind the troops.

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In the brief silence that followed the assembly of the last formation, Grimbaldus' head swam in the scents of manure, sweat, horse urine, and the musty smell of the cut and drying hay in the surrounding fields. The fragrant vinegar of the rotting hoar apples mingled with the stench of decaying muck, which the seven thousand troops had just dug up traversing the stream. There was a lingering scent of wood smoke from the night's campfire in his hauberk,¹⁴ and a fine soot mingled in his sweat that made the *cuir-boulli*¹⁵ of his shin guards and his ringed byrnie¹⁶ smell of leather. He was one with the earth. Somehow the crisp air of morning, sweetened by the dew, cut fragrantly through his nostrils past all of these earthy scents.

Gone were the stars and the comet. His future was now completely guided by his own earthly pursuits. He would make his own destiny. The sun finally balanced the chill in his mail, and he felt his strength building. He was glad that it was not raining. He resolved to enjoy this day, for, win or lose, it would be the climax of his young life. Ahead lay his death or his future as a knight, a landowner, and a patriarch. It would be a new beginning. At his back lay Normandy and his paltry, bastard's share of his father's estate—the scraps that would fall to an illegitimate son.¹⁷ He understood exactly why his cousin was here: a bastard who could be king. He resolved to relish and to accept whatever lay ahead.

His concentration broke with a growing rumble all about him. It was time. The word had come to the archers, and they marched forward. Although William's specific battle plan was fresh in their minds, they began an ancient script that had played in *every* conflict in the history of confrontation. As it had been for millennia, whichever side was most ready to accept the immediate challenge mustered their best technology and their most skilled participants, and thrust them boldly into the unknown future. The archers, infantry, and then the knights began an indecipherable roar, which grew as the archers advanced. It mattered little that all varieties of dialect were rising at once. It seemed to Grimbaldus that this must have been what Babel was like as the citizens struggled to make themselves heard, and yet the message to Harold in this din was unmistakable.

At a point only fifteen rods in front of the Saxon hoard, the archers stopped as the thundering voices continued to crescendo while the Saxons echoed the primal chant. It sounded as though the gates of Hell had opened, or as though a great wind was howling through this forest of men and horses. Trumpets on both sides were lost in the torrent.¹⁸ There on the shores of England on a brisk October morning of the Year of Our Lord one thousand sixty six, the bows of the archers were raised and the ancient message roared again:

We are coming.

Grimbaldus savored the moment as the arrows flew. He cinched his leather gloves down so that they hugged each powerful finger. He pulled down his helmet. His turn was coming, but for now he peered from either side of the nasal at his cousin's conquest as it began to unfold.

The archers pelted the Saxons. To Grimbaldus' surprise, few arrows came back from the hill. The battle plan had been that they would recover the arrows fired back at them, and exchange until they had thinned the Saxon line. As it was, they ran out of arrows after only a few minutes. Their volleys hit the fyrd's front wall of round shields and scarcely cut the English ranks at all.

Grimbaldus was surprised at the pace at which the plan of battle played out. Before he knew it, the infantry in front of him had advanced through the archer lines, and had taken on the enemy's swords and axes. Without the hail of arrows, the English were free to throw stones, javelins, and all manner of missile at the climbing infantry. The English had adopted the Danish battle-axe: two broad blades on one handle, resembling a butterfly. These and all the other weapons did not bear the butterfly's typical colors: the weapons all began to take on a crimson shimmer, accented by silver flashes. These were the hallmark of war.¹⁹

The Bretons on the left faltered and retreated back down the hill, even before the third wave, the knights, had gotten the order to advance. Grimbaldus watched with horror as the entire left flank collapsed

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backwards towards the sandy bog, inundating the knights with retreating and wounded archers and infantry. The horses were mired as badly as they had been in Pevensey. The army had already lost the solid footing on the left.

Harold had waited long enough. He had mustered all of his patience to let the Normans advance across this stream, and now he had a portion of it pinned in the bog. He detached a portion of his right flank to pursue the retreating Bretons.

The Breton, Norman, and Flemish forces began to peel away in sequence from the front, angling to protect their weakening flanks. The Flemish on the right flank retreated all the way back to the stream, leaving the Normans alone ahead of the bog, like the tip of an arrow, trying to resist the Saxons. Grimbalduis looked to find his cousin, and his heart sank. There was William's horse, dying on the battlefield, next to William's pennon. William was nowhere to be seen.

"Il est mort!" wailed an infantryman in the line.

"Il est vivant!" bellowed Bishop Odo from his stallion, charging across the line. *"Regardez!"* William, cloaked in mud, galloped by on a fallen comrade's horse, the nasal of his helmet tossed back, eyes locking with every one of his troops.²⁰ An archer raced forward and raised the earl's pennon.

"Venez! A droite!" roared William, his sword in the air. Grimbalduis saw the reason. A small detachment of Saxons were already penetrating through the right flank, and threatening to pierce through to the baggage guard at the rear. The English huscarles²¹ facing Grimbalduis's Norman column were still up on the knoll in a defensive shield around Harold. Harold would not personally advance into the teeming mass of flaying weapons, so the Norman center would remain relatively safe.²²

Grimbalduis and a faction of the Norman knights hurtled to the right, flaying swords and lances into the Saxon line, which was completely blindsided by the crossing attack. From the moment of the first swing

of his sword, Grimbaldu was oblivious to the chaos all around him, as one by one, he assessed the next most threatening opponent, and either trampled or hacked his way through the concentration of the enemy. His eyes glazed. His own pulse and breath thundered in his ears. The screams of his foe were simple accents to the roar that he heard from his own body. He was slightly nicked on his leg, but a leg wound was nearly insignificant to a mounted warrior. He would deal with it later.

Slowly he ascertained that he was not alone in his success. The few mounted Normans cut through the Saxons' left flank as though they were wheat, not soldiers. Count Eustace and the Flemish troops trudged up out of the bog, and the Norman center advanced farther up the hill. A similar small fraction of the knights in the center and their supporting infantry now mirrored the flanking maneuver on the left, and started to cut down the Bretons' foes in the sandy bog to the west. A general retreat by the Saxons ensued as the exhausted invaders slowly emerged out of the sand and mire. An eerie quiet fell over the battlefield.

Grimbaldu took his mount back to the stream for water, then rode to the high ground behind the lines for a moment to bind his wound. There would be a scar, but there was no muscle damage. He cinched the straps tighter, and rode back to his ranks. Below him the archers were enthusiastically gathering up their own arrows, which the few Saxon archers had slowly but steadily lobbed back into their ranks throughout the morning. The infantry was rotating in small detachments back to the stream to wash, to drink, and to rest. With the sun at their backs as they returned to the front, they gathered their choice of weapons from the fallen. Insults bellowed from line to line, but no further rocks, axes, or arrows fell down from the Saxons. These all had been spent, and lay useless in the midfield between the armies.

As Grimbaldu came close to William's standard²³ his cousin was dispatching messengers to the three divisions with the new plan. As the messengers departed, he saw a prayer answered, as Harold's diminished troops began to consolidate towards the middle, maintaining their original depth, but now on a front nearly a stadium's

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length shorter. A second set of messengers hurtled after the first: "*Maintain your spacing!*"

Harold's troops squinted into the low autumn sun. That blazing fireball had been in their eyes all day, and as the afternoon had arrived its glare was growing tiresome. Down in the shadows the Norman foe continued to bask in the coolness by the stream, refreshed. The English were tired. They were hot. Their arrows and stones, lances and axes all lay below them down the hill. What they needed was a reprieve. What they got was a reprise. A drum began to beat, a familiar roar welled up from the valley, and once again, a line of Hell's archers advanced up the hill. This time, however, the line looked thicker.

In fact, the advance was a lot thicker: it was three deep of archers, four deep of infantry, followed closely by the whole Norman cavalry. The entire army advanced together: no one was held in reserve. The line approached unopposed to within fifteen rods, and immediately the hail of arrows began. This time, the arrows flew over the unsupplied Saxon archers and huscarle line in the front, plunging into the fyrd in the rear. While the archers stopped their march and rained arrows and fire above the Saxons, the Norman infantry advanced through, marching safely and unopposed under the arcing arrows, now wielding the choicest weapons left in the bog.

The wide column of infantry wrapped unopposed around both flanks as the archers stepped in behind them to catch the ends of the Saxon line in a crossfire. The defenseless Saxon archers started to push back through their own infantry as the Norman swords and javelins cut down every fourth man. As the battle boiled at the interface, Grimbaldu and his cavalry looked for holes to break open. Suddenly, the heavily armored center of huscarles collapsed back into a tight knot around Harold's position by the royal pennons²⁴. Harold could no longer be seen on his horse. A Norman arrow had found its mark and had wounded the self-proclaimed king in the eye. His royal guard sucked in around him as the surgeon tended to the wounded leader.

Grimbaldus and the other knights in the center charged the line, competing with every other individual in the field for the same open hole, as the entire Saxon front balled up to fill the vacuum in the middle. The advantage of horse over man in both strength and size soon led to the inevitable as a cluster of knights on Grimbaldus' left punched into the huscarle knot. As William surged into the line he slew Harold where he lay. Grimbaldus swung his sword at anyone carrying the telltale round shield²⁵ or long hair,²⁶ lunging and driving toward the standard on the right. Suddenly, he was face to face with Leofwine, Harold's youngest brother. Just as quickly, Leofwine fell lifeless before him, the victim of an infantryman's axe. The rout was on as the core of the English army hurtled backwards towards the woods, and the Normans toppled the Saxon pennons in the setting sun.

That night the stars and the comet came out again. Laying by his horse, Grimbaldus tended his wound while his mind raced with the events of the day. How much a small band of men could accomplish in so short a time! He remembered his thoughts of the morning as he again contemplated the comet's twin tails. A shooting star, and then two more, shot from the belt of Orion.²⁷ *The warrior will have children*, he thought, happy that the bleeding had finally stopped. He pondered the helmet he had retrieved from a dead Saxon: a hollow shell that this morning had wrapped a man's head. The line between life and death was so slim—a matter of chance. He was elated that *he* would indeed live to ponder the meaning of the stars over and over again. The comet was touching the horizon as he fell into a deep sleep. There would be time enough to figure it out.

CONTEXT AND COMMENT

It took until 1072 for the Normans to subdue all of England. Uprisings and minor treasonous attacks occurred almost continuously from 1068 through 1072 as Norman Rule solidified. However, after October 14, 1066, England was never again successfully invaded. Her natural sea boundary was one deterrent of course, but it was the Normans' dramatic change in government administration that solidified the island as a powerful unified nation impervious to invasion. Such stability had not been seen since the Romans departed centuries before. Their new nation has persisted for a millennium, and is a model for all modern government.

Grimbaldus was one of thousands who fought at the Battle of Hastings. Unlike the few known leaders and landholders, he was *almost* anonymous, as were fifteen thousand other combatants. Had he died that day from his wound, the twenty-seven generations that follow him in this book would not have been born. Each generation branched into more and more brothers, sisters, cousins, *et cetera*. Simple math implies that this man with no discernible past is carried in the genes of over a billion distant descendants in the modern world. Ironically, we are similarly descended from every *other* surviving combatant on the field that day, on both sides of the line.

In the shorter term, this one combatant played a small role on the pivotal day that spelled the beginning of the end of the Dark Ages. On this day, the Norman system of government took root in Britain. His children, and his children's children's children all had equally subtle roles in the shaping of society as we know it today. The succeeding chapters follow a single line of Grimbaldus' otherwise anonymous descendants who have built the modern world one day at a time. These twenty-eight days mark mankind's path to the stars. The journey begins with a tired, anonymous warrior pondering the mysteries of the heavens. We leave him as he nurses his wound on a bloodstained hillside in the south of England in the Year of our Lord 1066, while he yearns for the stars.

NOTES:

¹ The comet that would later be named for Sir Edmund Halley appeared April 24. It was visible in the daylight the week that Harold had crowned himself king in June of 1066. Harold took it to be a bad omen.

² By October, the comet was near its closest approach to the sun. An early tail is formed by the interaction of the dust and vapors with the low concentration of gas in the inner solar system: the comet's debris spreads out behind the comet in its own orbital path, as the debris slows by very slight drag in this gas. A second tail is sometimes formed closer to the sun, by the solar wind ionizing some vapor, and blowing it more effectively straight outwards by electric attraction to the solar wind. The comet's head would have been visible just after sunset, setting about two hours later. The tails would have still been visible for hours, but invisible by dawn.

³ St Grimbald's day is July 8.

⁴ St. Grimbald (c825-903) was a French monk from Pas-de-Calais, who left France at the invitation of Alfred I of England to rejuvenate the Christian faith there, and to translate the Latin texts into Old English. He declined the position of Archbishop of Canterbury in 889. His body is enshrined in a silver coffin, which now resides in Hyde, having been moved after his original burial in New Minster.

⁵ No genealogical records have shown Grimbaldus's ancestors. However, he is claimed to be "a relative of William the Conqueror" in several accounts. Only one faint clue exists: one of the names of Grimbaldus' children (Ranulf) matches the lineage of the family into which William's cousin, Alix of Normandy, married. William's father, Robert the Devil, had a castle across the Seine from Rouen. It is therefore possible that Grimbaldus' family originated near that city.

⁶ $\overline{\text{VMMM}}$ is the Roman numeral for 8000: Arabic numerals were virtually unknown to the Normans, although Pope Sylvester II had tried to get the Church to adopt such numerals a century before. Arabic numerals would remain unused by the European cultures for centuries, even with the fall of Toledo only nineteen years later.

⁷ $\overline{\text{VMM}}$ is 7000

⁸ Pope Alexander II had commissioned William to restore the Holy Church to its former prominence in England, and gave William his banner to take into the battle. It was a single cross on a three-paled

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banner. Compare this simple emblem with the legate's banner two centuries later, in Chapter 5: "Thrice Before Dawn."

⁹ A stadium is a Roman measure, equal to 202 yards.

¹⁰ A rod is 16 ½ feet long. (Old English measure)

¹¹ The battle took place on Senlac Ridge. The slope uphill for the Normans was significant: twenty degrees or more. Harold's original plan to attack William's Norman camp was altered as soon as he saw the military advantages of the terrain at Senlac Ridge. He quickly decided to defend rather than to attack, on truly *outstanding* terrain. Norman tactics and the advantage of cavalry were nearly outmatched in this single move.

¹² The fyrd was an irregular army of serfs, commanded into service by the king. The fyrd was quickly supplanted by knight-service, which was soon to prove its vast superiority as a means of raising a trained and loyal army.

¹³ Although they were tired from a four-day, 160-mile march, Harold's troops had secured some of the best weapons in the world from the slaughtered troops of the Norwegian king Harold Hardrada at the Battle of Stamford Bridge only a week before.

¹⁴ A hauberk is a type of tunic.

¹⁵ Cuir-boulli is boiled & dried leather. Like the sole of a shoe, it is tough to penetrate, and holds its shape well.

¹⁶ Ringed byrnie is a type of outer armor: there is historical debate about the use of full ringed chain mail at this battle. It is evident that the byrnie was used extensively— this was a leather garment with iron rings sewn to it for additional protection. True chain mail was used in the coif, a veil-like flexible curtain hanging from the helmet. A Norman knight's armor was knee-length, split so as to allow him to mount a horse.

¹⁷ Grimbaldu's illegitimacy is assumed due to lack of genealogical records.

¹⁸ The chronicler William of Jumièges wrote: "The terrible sound of trumpets on both sides announced the opening of the battle."

¹⁹ Red and silver are heraldic colors indicating warrior ancestry. Since the Bacon line traces to the battle of Hastings, these colors are the primary fields of the Bacon family coat of arms, awarded centuries later to the family. The lack of intricate patterns in the coat of arms indicates the family's early origins. Heraldry was not in use at the time of the battle (see next note), although the Saxons had a flag of sorts, emblazoned with a white horse which symbolized an ancient enormous chalk artwork covering a hillside near Uffington in Harold's home region of Wessex. The prehistoric earth carving is still visible today.

²⁰ The confusion that kept the troops from knowing immediately which armored warrior was their leader, and indeed whether he was alive or dead, led to the practice of heraldry. It was a great risk for the Conqueror to take off any armor in mid-battle, but a greater risk to have his troops unsure of his fate. William lost three horses during the battle. (The Normans had brought three horses for every knight.)

²¹ The "huscarle" was the mounted "house guard": the elite of the Saxon troops. They were not skilled in actually conducting battle on horseback.

²² At worst, even if the huscarles ever actually rode down into the battle it would be an even infantry match, since they only used their horses for transport. Being primarily farmers, they would not risk their farm horses in the battle, for they were too valuable to their future incomes. The Norman cavalry was free to detach and assist the Flemish troops, for they bred horses for warfare, not ploughs.

²³ The standard was a small circle of advisors and messengers who clustered around the King's pennon.

²⁴ Harold's pennons were the windsock banner in the shape of the Dragon of Wessex, and the Saxon "Fighting Man" on a gold-embroidered background. William sent the latter to Pope Alexander II as a trophy in gratitude for his papal support of the Norman conquest.

²⁵ The Normans, by contrast to the Saxon round shield, used a kite-shaped shield that came to a point near the knees.

²⁶ The Normans shaved their heads, and were called "Roundheads". The Saxons wore extremely long hair, and were readily identifiable as a foe.

²⁷ Another effect of comets is a predictable meteor shower on the same day, every year. The dust from the first tail stays in the same orbital plane as the comet. When the Earth passes near the point where the comet traveled before, it runs into dust that has streamed out behind the comet. During the year that the comet makes its close approach the meteor storm is particularly heavy, due to the high density of particles in the tail. The meteors all appear to come out of one place in the sky as the earth enters the dust cloud. On October 15 every year (and particularly in the close pass of 1066), the dust from Halley's comet lights up the sky, shooting in all directions from the belt of Orion (hence the term Orinid Meteor Shower).

"It is a revered thing to see an ancient castle not in decay, but how much more it is to behold an ancient family which has stood against the waves and weathers of time."

- Sir Francis Bacon