

Chapter One

LYRNESSUS

Eperitus licked his pale lips, feeling the old lines where they had cracked again and again under a ruthless foreign sun. Ten years of that same sun had given his skin a leathery texture so that when he smiled, which was not often, his teeth were white against his deeply tanned face. With his braided beard and long black hair – combed tightly back and tied behind his neck – he looked more like a savage than the handsome man he had once been. And perhaps he was a savage, for the only trade he had ever known was fighting and there was little humanity in war.

His thoughtful brown eyes, red around the rims and creased at the corners, were fixed on the ridge ahead, waiting patiently for the next battle to begin. The accoutrements of his profession had been strapped and buckled into place long before dawn, each item as familiar and comfortable as if they were parts of his body. On his head was the same bronze cap he had worn since before his exile from Alybas twenty years before. Its battered cheek-guards were tied under his chin by leather cords, which he had tucked into his dirty woollen scarf to prevent them becoming untied in battle. Over his patched thigh-length tunic – once a vivid scarlet but now faded to a watery pink – was a close fitting, ox-hide corslet that bore the scars of countless hand-to-hand combats. Bronze greaves tied about cloth gaiters protected his shins, while hanging from a strap across his shoulder was his grandfather's old shield. This was almost as tall as Eperitus himself and was shaped like two overlapping, convex circles – the broader at the bottom and the smaller on top – with a raised wooden crest running down the centre. Though the shield's four-fold leather had been hacked and

pierced innumerable times, and it was of an old and cumbersome style that had long since faded from battlefields, Eperitus refused to replace it, considering it as much a part of himself as his own name.

While his shabby collection of armour had saved him from the spear points and sword blades of countless enemies over the years, it was his weapons that were the tools of his trade. Tucked into his belt was the ornate golden dagger King Odysseus had given him as a token of friendship when they had first met. In a plain leather scabbard under his left arm was his double-edged sword, slung at a height where its silver-studded ivory handle could be found and drawn with ease. Finally, in his right hand was his primary weapon, a tall Trojan spear which he had plundered from its dead owner during a skirmish the previous summer, his own having been launched at a horseman whose mount had then fled, carrying its impaled rider and Eperitus's spear with it. Without these heavy and brutal weapons he was not a warrior, and if he was not a warrior then he was nothing, a mere mortal without reputation or honour who would one day perish and be forgotten.

To Eperitus's right stood Odysseus, king of Ithaca, the man he had followed to this sun-baked, mosquito-infested and scorpion-plagued country. With his short legs, heavily muscled torso and large head – almost devoid of a neck – Odysseus could never be considered a fine looking man. His long red hair was tied behind his neck and his thick beard, flecked with grey, reached down to his chest. Like Eperitus, there was a tang of fresh sweat about him, mingled with the odour of wood smoke and roast mutton. His breastplate and shield were battered and dusty, while his bronze helmet with its nodding plume of black horsehair had been dented in so many places that its surface rippled in the early morning sunshine. Over his shoulders he wore the thick double-cloak his wife had given him at their parting ten years before. It was threadbare and heavily patched, and the purple wool had faded to a silvery grey at the shoulders, but he would no more replace it than Eperitus would his grandfather's shield. It was all he had left of his beloved Penelope, whose vivid intelligence and bright company he still missed with all his heart, even though her beautiful face was little more than a memory now.

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But if Odysseus's appearance was undistinguished and beggarly compared to the other kings who had flocked to Troy, the fact that he was of high birth was unmistakable. His intelligent green eyes – full of a ready humour – were stiffened by an iron will; his face appeared kind and approachable at most times, but there was an authority lying just beneath the surface that no man would dare cross lightly. More than anything, though, Odysseus's power was in his voice. When he spoke, men listened. He could still a room with a simple sentence and sway even the most adverse opponents with his smooth tones and well-reasoned arguments. There was no other man in the whole Greek army – neither the great Achilles nor the noble Diomedes, the kind-hearted Menelaus nor the fearsome Great Ajax – Eperitus would rather serve.

Standing a little behind the two men was the Ithacan army, arrayed in six ranks of a hundred men each. There was a low murmur of conversation as they waited with bored patience for the order to advance. They had stood there since the first light of dawn, after beaching their ships on the sandy coastline and marching up to the low line of hills that hid the city of Lyrnessus, but they did not complain as their spears and ox-hide shields grew heavy in their hands. They had endured much in the past nine years and were no longer the mixture of inexperienced farmers and fishermen who had first answered their king's call to arms. Now they were true warriors, hardened by the long years of fighting that had sifted the weak from the strong. Only those with an instinct for warfare and a fierce anger in battle had survived; the remainder had been killed long ago, their souls conducted to the underworld by Hermes, the shepherd of the dead.

In the front rank were the men of the royal guard. These were the heavily-armed elite who had once formed Ithaca's standing army in the days before the war. Well trained and highly motivated, with a fearless devotion to their king, they were the pride of the Ithacan army. Unlike the scavenged weaponry of the levied masses behind them, each guard was equipped with greaves, a plumed bronze helmet with cheek-guards, a breastplate and an oval shield with a flattened bottom edge and a bronze boss. Swords hung from their sides and long daggers were tucked into their belts, while their main weapons were the two spears that each man

carried. The guards were the first in every attack and the last in any retreat, a perilous duty that had taken its toll over the years but which they carried out with unquestioning loyalty. Their losses were filled by the bravest men from the rest of the army – those who had proved their courage, skill and thirst for glory during the numerous battles with Troy and her allies.

Odysseus had selected the best warriors from the royal guard to head the assault on Lyrnessus. Each was in charge of ten men with a tall, well-built ladder between them; twenty ladders in total. They would march to the city concealed among the ranks of the other Ithacans, then dash out to the walls, place their ladders and begin climbing. The first up, Odysseus had insisted as he explained the assault to the men of the guard, would be the leader of each group – a dangerous job, especially if the walls were well defended, but one which would bring glory in the eyes of men and gods alike. As he had expected, his words were greeted with a chorus of demands to lead. The loudest were from Polites, who, though normally a quiet man, had a voice to match his giant-like physique when he wanted to be heard, and from Antiphus, the best archer in the army and one of its longest-serving veterans. These two were stood in the centre of the front rank now, the heads of their ladders resting against their calf muscles as they waited with calm indifference for the day's action to begin

On either side of the Ithacans were the armies of Argos and Phthia: the ranks of the Argives to their left, four thousand men massed behind the tall and handsome King Diomedes, with Sthenelaus and Euryalus at his side; and the black-clad Myrmidons from Achilles's homeland of Phthia to their right, three thousand of the fiercest and most ruthless warriors in the whole Greek army, formed up behind the stout and hardy figure of Peisandros. Like their Ithacan comrades, both armies were a mixture of irregularly-equipped levies fronted by a core of hardened warriors. Large numbers of ladders had been evenly distributed through their ranks, ready for the assault. Standing behind them were the archers of Locris, two thousand men led by the short and angry figure of Little Ajax. These carried no shields and wore only leather caps and jerkins of layered cloth for protection, placing their trust in the wall of infantry before them and the long range of their bows and slings.

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In the rearmost ranks of each army stood men carrying tall, bronze-tipped pikes, normally used for ship-to-ship fighting because of their long reach. From the upper third of each pole a canvas banner streamed forward in the breeze from the sea, fluttering and snapping over the heads of the men below. The flags had been Odysseus's idea earlier in the war, to help warriors find their units in the dust and clamour of battle and for other commanders to identify where their allies were amidst the chaos. Each army had its own symbol: for the Ithacans it was a blue dolphin, while the Locrians' banner carried the device of a coiled brown serpent, in honour of the snake that Little Ajax wore around his shoulders at all times. Diomedes's Argives fought beneath a golden fox on a green field, which was now torn and filled with arrow holes from always being at the forefront of battle. In even worse condition was the banner of the Myrmidons, the tattered remains of which featured an eagle with a serpent in its beak.

The four armies had been chosen by Achilles, who had insisted on leading the attacks against Lyrnessus, Adramyttium and Thebe, the cities that guarded Troy's supply route from the lands of Mysia and Lydia in the south. Knowing there was none better who could give him the victory he so desperately needed, Agamemnon had agreed to Achilles's demand. Not that the King of Men expected either city to present a problem. The walls, gates and ditches that protected them were nothing compared to the god-built battlements that had defended Troy for so long. Most significantly, the once powerful garrisons that had deterred earlier attacks had been slowly stripped of their best men to feed the battles around Troy, company after company marching away until all that remained were local militias made up of old greybeards and men wounded in the war – no match for a force of nearly ten thousand Greeks.

'I can hear horses,' Eperitus announced quietly. 'Three of them, approaching fast.'

His senses had been supernaturally sharp ever since he had brought back from death by Athena nearly twenty years before, and he was easily able to filter out the murmur of the soldiers behind him to focus on the heavy galloping of hooves from the other side

of the ridge. Odysseus could hear nothing beyond the hubbub of voices, but he trusted his friend's ears and gave him an assured nod.

'It'll be Achilles, with Patroclus and Antilochus,' he said. 'And about time, too.'

A few moments later the thudding beat was heard by every ear, and then with a whinnying neigh and a barked command three horsemen appeared in silhouette at the top of the ridge, surrounded by a billow of dust. The riders paused for a moment to survey the massed ranks below them, then with a shout of 'Hah! Hah!' the first drove his horse straight down the slope towards Odysseus, followed closely by his companions.

'What news, Achilles?' Odysseus called, striding out to meet the riders with his hands raised.

Achilles pulled his horse's head aside with the reins and leapt from the animal's back, landing lightly a few paces in front of the king of Ithaca. He swept his black cloak back over his shoulder to reveal a well-made bronze breastplate and a sword, hanging from a baldric at his side. He carried no shield or spear and his head was helmetless, so that his long blond hair shone in the sunlight as he offered Odysseus his hand.

'Good news, my friend,' he answered, his handsome face breaking into a confident smile as Odysseus gripped his wrist. 'This little fight isn't going to be as dull as I first thought. The gods have given us the chance of some real glory!'

'What do you mean?' Odysseus asked. 'Has the garrison returned since Diomedes and I were here a few days ago?'

'Lyrnessus won't be a problem,' one of the other riders announced, trotting up behind Achilles. Patroclus slid from his mount with an easy motion and stared down his long, pointed nose at Odysseus and Eperitus. 'The battlements are no higher than two tall men and there's only one tower, guarding the southern gateway – just as you reported. As for defenders, I didn't count any more than five men on the walls in total. It'll be a disappointing way to start the year's fighting, I'm afraid, after such a long and tiresome winter.'

'To Hades with Lyrnessus!' Achilles exclaimed. He draped a tightly-muscled arm over Patroclus's shoulder and leaned his weight against his companion's tall and sinewy frame. 'We found

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something much more interesting than that pile of rubble. We found *Aeneas!*'

'Aeneas?' Eperitus asked, surprised to hear the name of one of Troy's finest warriors. 'What's *he* doing this far from Troy?'

'He didn't give me the chance to ask,' Achilles said, slipping his arm from Patroclus and pacing the ground before the two Ithacans. 'We'd almost scouted the full circuit of the walls when we saw half a dozen horsemen coming over the ridge to the north of here. They could hardly have missed ten thousand Greeks waiting on the other side of the hills, so I gave Patroclus and Antilochus here a look and didn't find them wanting.'

He nodded at the third rider, a long-faced youth with cold, grey eyes who was still growing his first beard. Antilochus was the son of Nestor, one of Agamemnon's closest advisers, and had arrived at the Greek camp just a few days before, contrary to his father's wishes. Impressed by the lad's eagerness to fight, Achilles had persuaded Nestor to let him stay, on the promise he would shepherd the lad through his first battle.

'We weren't going to let them reach the city alive,' Achilles continued. 'And that was when I recognized Aeneas – and *he* recognized *me*. I dug my heels back and set off after him at a gallop, and even with the head-start he had he'd never have outrun Xanthus if he hadn't ordered his escort against us. By the time we'd fought our way through them Aeneas was safely inside the city walls. Safe for *now*, at least.'

Odysseus stroked his beard and looked up at the line of hills, in the direction of Lyrnessus.

'I don't like it,' he muttered, as if to himself. 'Eperitus is right – what business would Aeneas have out here?'

'Who cares?' Achilles said dismissively. 'The point is we have one of their best fighters bottled up in that city, and before the day's done I'll send his cowardly soul down to Hades.'

As he was speaking, Diomedes and Little Ajax appeared at Eperitus's left shoulder. The Argive king was a tall, muscular figure, dressed in armour that befitted his wealth. He removed the gleaming bronze helmet from his head to reveal long auburn hair and a stern but handsome face, the only blemish on which was the faint trace of a white scar running down from the tip of his left ear

and into his thick beard. Little Ajax, on the other hand, was a short, spiteful-looking man with a flat nose and pockmarked cheeks. A long brown snake was draped over his shoulders, its triangular head raised and its pink tongue slithering out from its lipless mouth, sending a shiver of disgust through Eperitus. Ajax's dark eyes frowned up at Achilles from beneath his single eyebrow.

'What's the delay?' he demanded. 'I've been waiting all winter to kill some Trojan scum and my spear-arm's getting restless.'

'The itching of your spear-arm is nothing compared to the suffering of Helen,' Diomedes rebuffed him. 'If the fall of this city brings her freedom a step closer, then let's get on with it. Zeus only knows what she's gone through as a prisoner of Troy, kept from her husband and children and forced to endure the lustful intentions of Paris every night.'

'*Forced?*' Ajax scoffed. 'That trollop wanted Paris between her thighs from the first moment she...'

He fell silent as the point of Diomedes's dagger pressed against his throat.

'If you say another word against the queen of Sparta, it'll be your last,' he warned.

Ajax met the cold stare of the Argive king with equal menace, but said nothing.

'We've delayed long enough,' Achilles said, taking Diomedes's wrist and easing the blade away from Ajax's neck. 'We attack immediately – unless Odysseus has any more misgivings?'

Odysseus shook his head.

'Same plan as before?' Diomedes asked, sliding his dagger back into his belt.

Achilles nodded, looking over his shoulder at the ridge. 'The Argives and Ithacans will scale the western walls while my Myrmidons will take the southern gate. Ajax's Locrians can hang back and shoot any Trojan who dares show his head above the battlements. There's still the ditch, but the walls behind it are low and we have the ladders. Even if they're alerted to our presence, nothing can stop Lyrnessus from being ours by midday.'

Without another word he turned and held his hand out to Xanthus. The horse answered his call immediately and soon

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Achilles, Patroclus and Antilochus were riding to join Peisandros at the head of the Myrmidon line. As Diomedes and Little Ajax returned to their own armies, Odysseus arched his eyebrows and turned to his captain.

‘I don’t like this, Eperitus. The Trojans have outwitted us too many times over the years, and if Aeneas is here then that spells trouble. He’s one of the best commanders they have – Hector wouldn’t send him down here without a very good reason.’

‘We can hardly turn around and get back in the ships now,’ Eperitus answered. ‘We’ll just have to climb the walls and see what’s inside.’

Odysseus smiled back at him. ‘You’re right, of course, and we might as well enjoy ourselves while we’re at it. Give the order.’

Eperitus turned on his heel and looked at the expectant faces of the Ithacan soldiers.

‘Shields ready. Pick up the ladders.’

Similar orders were barked out up and down the Greek line, followed by a flurry of movement as shields were taken up, ladders lifted and spears readied. Achilles received his spear and shield from two of his men and moved to the head of the Myrmidon army. Raising the spear above his head, he pointed it toward the line of hills. There was a great cheer from the whole Greek assembly and the Myrmidons began to move.

Eperitus instinctively kissed his fingertips and placed them against the image of a white deer on the inside of his shield. He had painted it there to remind him of his daughter, Iphigenia, and though it was grimed and faded where he had repeatedly touched it for luck he felt reassured by its presence. Odysseus discreetly touched the image of Athena painted on the inside of his own shield, then, after a glance at Eperitus, turned to the ranks of Ithacans and waved them forward.

The long lines of warriors advanced with a steady tramp, the Myrmidons, Ithacans and Argives in the lead with the Locrians forming a wide arc behind them. At first the bronze of their helmets and shield bosses shone fiercely in the sunlight, but as they marched slowly up the hillside the dust raised by their thousands of feet shrouded them in a brown cloud that dulled the glimmer of their weaponry. Soon they were topping the crest of the ridge and

looking out over a fertile, lightly wooded plain, dominated by a low hill at its centre. On top of the hill was a walled city, its sand-coloured battlements no higher than the scattering of windswept olive trees that surrounded it. A few two-storied buildings stood up above the level of the weathered parapets, but the only tower was at the southern end of the fortifications, guarding an arched gateway from which a narrow track wound down to the level of the plain. Here it met the main route from the city of Troy to its southern provinces, but as the ten thousand Greeks filed out across the western edge of the plateau not a single traveller could be seen up or down the length of the road.

A handful of sentinels stared silently out from behind the walls of Lyrnessus and a low horn call vibrated out across the plain to greet the newcomers, but no reinforcements hastened to join their colleagues on the battlements. Instead, the sombre noise was followed by a silence, which was quickly devoured by the clanking of the Greek army as it spread across the plain like pitch spilled from a bucket, file after file marching relentlessly towards their objective. Soon the soldiers of Argos and Ithaca were in place at the western foot of the hill, a bowshot from the walls, while the Myrmidons straddled the road to the south, facing the gate. The Locrian archers formed a wide crescent behind them, where they began standing their arrows point-down in the grass, ready to be fitted to their bowstrings and fired at any enemy that dared show themselves above the parapets. As the dust cloud the Greek host had raised was carried forward on a gentle breeze to veil the walls of Lyrnessus, Odysseus looked left to where Diomedes stood at the head of his Argives. Diomedes raised his arm and nodded. In response, Odysseus looked right to Achilles and raised his own arm.

‘Ladders at the ready,’ Eperitus called out behind him, all the time keeping his eyes on the distant, golden-haired figure of Achilles.

Achilles dismounted and gave the reins to one of his men, who in return handed him a bright helmet with a black plume and a visor shaped in the likeness of a grimacing face. Achilles was the only warrior who wore such a helmet, designed not for additional protection but to distinguish him on the battlefield, his reputation being such that the mere sight of the helmet filled his opponents

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with terror. As the soldier led the prince's horse away, Achilles placed the helmet on his head and lowered the hinged visor into place, while Patroclus stood before him and tied the leather thongs beneath his chin. With all eyes watching him, Achilles took up his shield and raised his huge spear above his head. A moment later, the point fell and the Greeks gave a great shout, their voices rebounding from the city walls.