

Chapter One

LEMNOS

Odysseus, king of Ithaca, stood at the stern of the galley, his short legs planted firmly apart on the deck and his muscular, top-heavy torso rolling gently with the subdued motion of the sea. His green eyes were impassive as they studied the walls of dense fog that surrounded the ship, seemingly unconcerned at the possibility they could be creeping towards their doom on a rocky shoal or drifting past their destination altogether. King Diomedes showed less patience, beseeching and cursing the gods with alternate breaths as he stood at Odysseus's left shoulder, his blue cloak swept back to reveal a gleaming breastplate and the golden pommel of a sword hanging at his side. Eperitus, captain of the Ithacan guard, was at Odysseus's other shoulder, his eyes on the crew as they pulled at the oars.

‘What do your senses tell you, Eperitus?’ Odysseus asked, his smooth voice amplified by the silence. ‘Are we near to Lemnos?’

Eperitus stared out at the thick mist, raising his chin a little as he focussed his hearing on sounds that were beyond the gentle creaking of the long oars in their leather loops and the swish and trickle of water across the blades. As he concentrated he began to hear things the others could not, noises diminished by distance that took a few moments to understand. With them came odours and aromas, and different tastes carried on the air, all of them delicate and insubstantial, but nevertheless distinct to his raised perceptivity.

‘I can hear crowds of gulls,’ he began, ‘squabbling and cawing like they used to on the cliffs and hillsides around Ithaca. And waves crashing against rocks. There’s a stink of seaweed and wet stone, but with a hint of soil and vegetation. It’s definitely land, though I can’t say whether it’s Lemnos or not.’

‘It is,’ Odysseus said confidently. ‘Which way?’

Eperitus pointed at an angle to the bearing they were travelling along. Odysseus gave a satisfied smile and glanced back over his shoulder.

‘North a little, Antiphus.’

The man at the helm nodded, a determined look on his face as he leaned the twin steering oars to the left.

‘I’m going to the prow,’ Odysseus announced. ‘I remember the rocks the first time we came here, and the last thing I want is one of them popping up out of this fog and tearing a hole in the hull.’

‘I’ll come with you,’ Eperitus said.

‘No need,’ Odysseus replied, placing an arresting hand on his broad chest. ‘Why don’t you stay here and make sure the anchor stones are ready? You can prepare the boat, too, while you’re at it.’

The fact the anchor stones and the small rowing boat could be quickly readied by any of the seasoned crew made Eperitus suspicious, and when Odysseus added one of his reassuring smiles he felt sure he was hiding something. Not that there was any point in questioning him; after twenty years as the king’s friend, Eperitus knew he would not reveal anything he did not have a mind to.

Odysseus bent down to pick up a bundle of fur and a wooden club that were stowed beneath one of the rowing benches.

‘That’s Agamemnon’s lion’s pelt, isn’t it?’ Diomedes said.

‘I borrowed it from him,’ Odysseus explained innocently.

‘What in Athena’s name do you want that for? And what’s the point of the club? If you’re planning to beat Philoctetes to death, don’t forget Calchas said we need to bring him back to Troy alive.’

‘Philoctetes probably perished years ago,’ Odysseus replied, ‘especially with that stinking wound of his. The important thing is to find his bow and arrows.’

Eperitus and Diomedes watched him walk down the centre of the galley, pausing halfway beside a gigantic warrior crammed onto the end of one of the benches. Odysseus leaned down and spoke close to the man’s ear, then handed him the lion’s pelt and the club before continuing to the prow.

‘Why’s he giving them to Polites?’ Diomedes asked. ‘He’s definitely up to something.’

Eperitus nodded. ‘But what?’

‘Some trick or other, no doubt.’

‘No, he promised me he’d act honourably, especially after the unjust way Philoctetes was marooned on Lemnos. All because the poor wretch was bitten by a snake.’

‘It was a harsh decision, but perhaps the years have helped us forget the stench of the wound and how he used to groan and wail.’

‘We were too harsh, my lord,’ Antiphus interrupted from his position at the twin rudder. As an archer himself, he had always empathised with Philoctetes. ‘With the bow and arrows Heracles gave him he could have ended the war in the first year. Hector and Paris were the backbone of the Trojan army, but two shots from Philoctetes would have brought them down in the dust and left the gates of Troy virtually undefended.’

‘Then perhaps it was the will of the gods that we abandoned him on Lemnos,’ Diomedes replied. ‘Though if he *has* survived, I wouldn’t want to fall foul of him if he still has his weapons. A good reason for us to remind Odysseus of what we agreed, don’t you think Eperitus?’

Eperitus nodded.

‘Omeros,’ he barked, staring at a lad who was sitting with his back against the side of the ship, busily restringing a tortoiseshell lyre, ‘put that damned thing away and make the boat ready. Get Elpenor to help you. And I want my breastplate, greaves and sword ready the moment we’re at anchor. If I find you’ve been spending more time on that instrument than you have cleaning and oiling my armour then you’ll only have yourself to blame for the consequences.’

Omeros leapt to his feet and called over to another young man who had been busy casting dice with his shipmates. Eperitus was certain his armour would not have been cared for nearly as well as Omeros's lyre, but he felt no anger at the fact. The truth was, since arriving at Troy only a few months before among a shipload of Ithacan replacements, he had proved himself to be a promising warrior with a propensity to learn quickly and a calm intelligence that was not flustered by the confusion of battle. That was why Eperitus had made him his squire. More than that, though, he found he liked the boy.

'And you, Eurylochus,' he continued, looking at a pot-bellied sailor who was sitting at one of the benches and gnawing on a scrap of dried beef, 'I want you to prepare the anchor stones.'

'I'm rowing,' Eurylochus replied through a mouthful of meat, refusing to look at Eperitus.

As much as Eperitus liked Omeros, he despised Eurylochus, who used the fact he was Odysseus's cousin as an excuse to be lazy and arrogant. Eperitus's dislike was more than matched by Eurylochus's own hatred for him, which was driven by jealousy and a misguided belief that the position of captain of the guard should have been his by right. But the years had taught Eperitus how to deal with Eurylochus.

'You'll be swimming if those anchor stones aren't ready by the time I return,' he said, and followed Diomedes to the prow while Eurylochus fumed behind him.

'You shouldn't embarrass my cousin in front of the crew, Eperitus,' Odysseus chided as they joined him.

Eperitus raised an eyebrow. 'You're right. I should've just stood there and let him undermine my authority.'

'The petulance of a small-minded fool won't harm the respect these men hold you in, you know that. And humiliating Eurylochus will only provoke him to acts of petty revenge – he's done it enough times in the past. Talking of disrespecting authority, didn't I ask *you* to prepare the anchor stones and the boat?'

'They're being seen to,' Diomedes answered. 'Besides, you've had your chance for a private word with Polites, so you should be grateful for two extra pairs of eyes in this fog.'

Odysseus grinned and the three men turned to stare out at the milky vapour that shifted spectrally around the galley.

‘I don’t know what you’re up to, Odysseus,’ Diomedes continued, scanning the mist, ‘but you promised us no tricks, remember? Philoctetes was shamefully treated when we left him here, and if he’s still alive after ten years then I doubt he’ll be feeling any better disposed toward us – especially as *you* were the one who brought him here. The first sign of deceit from you and he’ll shoot us all down like tethered doves.’

‘I brought him here to save him from being murdered after he beat Achilles and Medon,’ Odysseus retorted. ‘They’d have silenced his groaning for good if it hadn’t been for me. Not that I expect him to appreciate that. But I’ve agreed to let you do the talking and I’ll keep my promise, Diomedes – unless he speaks to me, that is. He’d sooner shoot me than talk to me, though, so that’s unlikely. And to make sure he doesn’t recognise me, I’ll keep my hood over my face and my lips sealed.’

Eperitus gave him a sceptical look. ‘And if we fail to persuade him?’

‘How can you? Assuming he’s survived this long and no passing ship has offered him passage back to Greece, then he’ll have been alone on this rock for ten years. Do you think he won’t snatch at the chance to get back to civilisation and a bit of human company? If he *does* show hesitation, any hesitation at all, just do what I said: offer him food and drink, and tell him about Calchas’s prophecy – that Troy can’t fall until *he* has rejoined the army. Believe me, after ten years without a sip of wine it’ll be impossible for him to refuse, and when the alcohol reaches his brain he’ll be yours for the taking.’

Diomedes frowned. ‘That’s trickery! I won’t dishonour myself by fooling the poor wretch.’

‘Forget the wine, then,’ Odysseus said with an exasperated wave of his hand. ‘Just appeal to his sense of glory! What is it Omeros says about warriors, Eperitus? *Always to be best, and to be distinguished above the rest.* Once you tell him he’s the key to the downfall of Troy, he’ll have swum to the galley before we can row there – lame or not. Persuading him to rejoin the army couldn’t be easier, even for a pair of oxhide shields like you.’

‘And if the end of the war and your returning home to Ithaca depends on us persuading him, and we fail?’ Eperitus asked. ‘What will you do then?’

‘You won’t fail. Calchas told us a decade ago that Troy would fall in the tenth year of the siege, so if that can’t happen without Philoctetes then we’re fated to succeed. It’s the will of the gods.’

‘Then may the gods help us,’ Eperitus replied, leaning forward and staring into the fog.

The three men fell silent again as they watched for black shapes amid the creeping fronds of mist ahead of them. Eperitus’s thoughts drifted back to the conversation he had had with Odysseus the evening before, after they had buried Great Ajax, the king of Salamis, on a cliff top overlooking the Aegean Sea. When Achilles had been slain by an arrow fired from the walls of Troy, Ajax had demanded his cousin’s god-made armour be given to him. And who could say he did not deserve it, after carrying Achilles’s corpse to the safety of the Greek lines while Odysseus and Eperitus had fought off the pursuing Trojans? Then when Odysseus deceived the Council of Kings into awarding the armour to him, the disgrace and humiliation had driven Ajax insane and he had taken his own life. Racked with guilt, Odysseus had sworn by Athena that he would never again pursue false glory, act with dishonour or be distracted from his sole purpose of returning home to Ithaca. From that point on he resolved only to seek the destruction of Troy and the ending of the war. But Eperitus knew that his friend’s ideas of honour and glory were different to his, and however deep his remorse over Ajax’s death he was unlikely never to resort to cunning or trickery again. To expect Odysseus not to use his natural guile was like asking a bird not to use its wings.

‘What’s that?’ hissed Diomedes, thrusting a finger towards a tall black shape emerging from the swirls of mist ahead of them.

Eperitus narrowed his eyes; there were other shapes beyond it, more rocks waiting to rip open the ship’s belly and condemn its crew to the same fate as Philoctetes. And suddenly every man on board could hear the seagulls and smell the pungent seaweed piled up on the crags, though only Eperitus’s nostrils could detect the underlying stench of corruption emanating from the island, a reek he had not known in such strength for ten years. They had found Philoctetes and he was still cursed by the terrible wound the gods had inflicted on him a decade before.

‘Throw the anchor stones overboard,’ Odysseus shouted. ‘And ready the boat. We’re going ashore.’