

Chapter One

MOUNT PARNASSUS

It was a chill dawn on the foothills of Mount Parnassus. The sun rose slowly in the east, infusing the dark, empty skies with a pale radiance. A collar of mist clung to the upper reaches of the purple mountainsides, shifting restlessly with the morning breeze. Eperitus shook the stiffness from his limbs and sniffed the air, which was sharp with the savoury prick of smoke. Pilgrims, he guessed warming themselves by freshly made fires before the trek up to the oracle.

He decided against the luxury of heat. After a frugal breakfast of cold porridge he gathered his few possessions and followed the bank of a stream that fed down from the hills. The sloping route was crooked and stony, but it gave an even footing and its steep banks were topped with twisted olive trees that hid his progress from unwelcome eyes. In his right hand he carried two ash spears, their shafts smooth and black. He also kept a sword slung in a scabbard under his left arm, its blade sharpened to a keen edge. Hanging from his shoulder was his grandfather's ox-hide shield, given to him by the old man before his death, whilst for added protection he wore a shaped leather corslet and greaves. A bronze helmet hid his long, black hair, its cheek guards tied loosely beneath his clean-shaven chin. His only other possessions were a thick cloak of brown wool, a bag of oats and stale bread, a skin of water and a pouch of copper pieces.

For a while as he walked the only sounds were the clear water washing over the stones of the riverbed and the sighing of the wind in the trees. Birdsong greeted the winter sun as it edged above the green hill tops, and he felt a lightness in his mood he had not sensed

since leaving his home in the north. The journey to Mount Parnassus had taken several days, during which he had walked alone with his sombre thoughts, pondering the fateful events that had forced him from his home. But now, with his goal only a few hours march away, his spirits were reviving with every step.

His peace was suddenly disturbed when harsh shouts erupted from behind the opposite bank of the river, followed by the angry clash of weapons. Men cried out in fear and confusion before, as suddenly as it had occurred, the din of fighting ceased and left a ringing silence in its wake.

Like most young Greek nobles, Eperitus had been taught to fight from an early age and this training came to the fore as he crouched low and glanced about himself, his spears clutched tightly in his sweating palm. Taking up his shield by its handgrip, he strained his ears for further sounds of battle. Although he had yearned to see combat for as long as he could remember, as battle lurked unseen amidst the troughs and swells of the landscape opposite he felt his mouth grow dry and the blood pump thicker through his veins.

He took a moment to calm his nerves, then splashed across the riverbed and threw himself down against the bank, his heart rampaging against the hard earth. Crawling cautiously up the slope, he eased into a position where he could spy on whatever waited beyond.

Before him was a broad bowl scooped out of the rocky landscape, filled with scrubby grass and circumvented by a low ridge. In the centre were the remains of a disturbed camp: the ashes of an extinguished fire, some wooden dishes and a few trampled cloaks. Two bands of warriors faced each other across the debris, waiting in taut readiness for a movement from the others.

The smaller group, whose camp had been attacked, had formed a line of perhaps a dozen shields. They were half dressed and had obviously armed in a hurry, but were organized and ready to defend themselves. At their centre, casually wiping blood from the point of his spear, stood a short and powerful warrior with a chest as broad as his shield and muscular arms that looked strong enough to break a man's spine. He was clearly of noble blood and stared at

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the opposing force with disdain, his eyes calm and untouched by fear.

Facing him were fully twenty men, standing in a line with the sun glinting on their raised spear points. They were too well armed to be bandits, so could only be deserters from the war in Thebes, where a siege was raging only a short march away. They had lost their discipline and looked haggard and weary. Their armour was scarred and covered in dust; some men bore the wounds of recent battles, and all looked as if they had not slept for days. Already one of them lay face down in the dirt.

Standing head and shoulders above them all was their champion. A colossus with a booming voice, he strode about shouting crude challenges to the nobleman. “Your father’s ghost rots nameless in Hades and your mother whores to feed her starving belly. Your children suckle at the breasts of slaves while your wife ruts with swineherds. And as for you!” He snapped his fingers in derision. “I’ll be stripping that armour from your dead body before breakfast.”

The giant’s insults received no response from his stocky opponent, who remained indifferent to the tirade. Eperitus, however, had heard enough. Driven by his hatred of deserters – and all men who had surrendered their honour – he leapt to his feet on top of the ridge and thrust one of his spears into the dirt by his sandals. Kissing the shaft of the other, he drew back his arm and launched it with all the momentum his body could command. A moment later it thumped into the spine of the foul-mouthed braggart, sending his vast bulk crashing forward into the dead fire. His thick fingers clawed furrows through the ashes as, with a final curse on his lips, his open mouth gushed blood over the blackened stumps of wood.

Eperitus did not stop to exult over a lucky throw. Plucking his remaining spear from the ground he ran at the twisting backs of the deserters, yelling at the top of his voice. Leaderless and taken by surprise, they dissolved into confusion before him. A spear was hurriedly thrown from one flank, but the aim was uncertain and the missile skimmed across the ground before his feet. Then three men in the centre of the group hurled their own weapons in another hasty attack. One split the air over Eperitus’s head; the second

clattered off the thick hide of his shield; the point of the third glanced off his left greave, crushing the leather against his shinbone.

The pain coursed up his leg and almost caused him to fall, but the momentum of his attack carried him on toward his assailants. Seeing the nearest fumbling to bring up his shield from his shoulder, he quickly sank the bronze head of his spear into his groin. The man fell backwards with a scream, doubling into himself and wrenching the spear from Eperitus's grip.

At once his two comrades drew their swords and rushed to attack, yelling with fear and anger as their weapons crashed against Eperitus's shield. He fell back before the onslaught, somehow keeping a grip on the heavy ox-hide as he held it out against their repeated blows. Meanwhile, with his free hand he tried desperately to pull his sword from its scabbard, knowing that his death was but a heartbeat away.

At that moment, the rank of men he had rushed to help cast their own spears into the disarrayed ranks of their opponents, laying several out in the dead grass. Then they raised their swords and charged across the gap that separated the two sides. Eperitus's attackers threw fearful glances over their shoulders, uncertain whether to rush to the help of their friends or finish the newcomer first.

Their indecision was an opportunity Eperitus did not waste. Tugging his sword free, he swung the obsessively sharpened blade in a wide arc around the side of his shield, shearing the leg off one of his enemies from above the knee. Blood spurted in great gouts over the dust and, with a look of disbelief in his red-rimmed eyes, the man toppled over into the mess of his own gore, there to thrash out the last moments of his life.

Eperitus leapt back from a thrust of the other man's sword. The attack was not forced, though, and for a moment they eyed each other from behind their shields. The surviving warrior was much older than Eperitus, a greybeard with the marks of previous battles on his face and body. It was also obvious he had come to the limit of his endurance: his bloodshot eyes were fearful and desperate, pleading for mercy. But Eperitus knew that if he lowered his guard for one moment, this same enemy would happily strike him down

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and send his ghost to the ignominious death the young soldier feared above all.

Breathing heavily, he gripped the leather-bound handle of his sword more firmly, turning his knuckles white. The ringing of bronze against bronze came from nearby, punctuated by shouting and the screams of the wounded. His opponent looked nervously over his shoulder, and in that instant Eperitus sprang forward, knocked the man's shield aside, and hacked his sword down through his ear and into the skull. He tugged the blade free and with a second, heavier swing, cut off his head.

By this time a new leader had gathered what remained of the deserters into a knot on one side of the hollow, where they struggled to hold off the attacks of their more disciplined opponents. Almost immediately another of their number fell writhing in the dust, struck down by a strong and stern-faced man, worn by age, battle and the elements. His grey hair and beard were long like a priest's, his armour old-fashioned but full. He used his shield to force a gap in the enemy line where his victim had fallen, but by then the battle was collapsing into a brawl, with men struggling against each other and seeking security in the closeness of their comrades. There was little room now to use the point of a spear or the edge of a sword. Each side was pushing its weight behind their shields, trying by brute force alone to break the wall of their foes. Men swapped curses instead of blows, so closely locked were they, and neither side gave ground.

Suddenly from the top of the ridge came the shouts of newcomers. A group of nine soldiers stood there with the plumes on their helmets fanning in the wind and the dawn sun flashing a savage red from their armour. Eperitus grew hopeful at the sight, thinking them reinforcements, but as the remaining deserters pulled back from the melee and ran up the slope to join them he realized that the battle was far from over. Pulling a spear from its lifeless victim he ran across to where the stocky noble was shouting orders at his men to reform in the base of the hollow.

The grey-haired warrior slapped Eperitus on the back, "Well done, lad," he welcomed him, without taking his eyes off the enemy line forming on the brow of the ridge. "It's a while since I've seen that much courage in battle. Or that much luck."

Grinning, Eperitus looked over to where their opponents were advancing down the slope towards them, pulling back their spears and choosing their targets. At that moment, the short nobleman stepped forward and held the palm of his hand out towards the enemy spearmen.

“Lower your weapons!” he ordered, his great voice stopping them in their tracks. “Too many men have already died today, and for what purpose? For the few copper pieces we carry? Don’t be fools – return to your homes and preserve your lives and your honour.”

In reply, one of the newcomers stepped forward and spat into the dust. His face was scarred and mocking and he spoke with a thick accent.

“Thebes was our home, and now it’s nothing more than a smoking ruin. But if you want to preserve your own miserable lives, give us the coppers you do have and we’ll let you go on your way. We’ll have your weapons and cloaks, too, and whatever else you might be carrying.”

“There are easier pickings than us in these hills, friend,” the nobleman responded, his voice calm and assuring. “Why waste more of your men’s blood when you can find yourselves some rich, defenceless pilgrims?”

There was a murmur of agreement from the line of spearmen, which stopped as the scar-faced man raised his hand for silence.

“We’ve had our fill of pilgrims,” he said. “Besides, our dead comrades are calling out for vengeance – you didn’t think we would just leave their deaths unpunished, did you?”

The nobleman sighed and then with surprising speed launched himself up the slope, hurling his heavy spear at the line of warriors and sending one toppling backwards under the weight of its impact. Eperitus felt the excitement rush through his veins as he charged with the others towards their foe, screaming and casting their spears before them. A few found their targets, causing the new arrivals to fall back as their confidence wavered. The scar-faced man hurried to rejoin his comrades, who threw their own spears a moment later. Their aim was hasty and sporadic, but a lucky cast found the eye of a young soldier running beside Eperitus, splitting his head like a watermelon and spraying the contents over his arm.

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The next moment Eperitus's sword was raised and he was driving into the enemy line with his shield. One man fell backwards before him, catching his heel on a stone. There was no time to plunge his sword into his prostrate body, however, as a much larger and stronger man leapt forward and thrust a blade straight through his shield. The point stopped a finger's breadth from Eperitus's stomach, before jamming tight in the layered ox-hide.

Eperitus snatched the shield to one side, tugging the sword from his opponent's hand and opening his guard. Without hesitation, he sank the point of his blade into the man's throat, killing him instantly.

As he fell another man lunged at his ribs with a spear. But before the point could spill his lifeblood onto the rocky ground, the grey-haired warrior appeared from nowhere and kicked the shaft to one side. With a sharp and instinctive movement that belied his age, he hacked off its owner's arm below the elbow and pushed his gored blade into the man's gut.

Covered in sweat and blood, they turned to face the next assault, but their remaining foes were fleeing over the ridge, leaving their dead behind them.