

Chapter One

UNWELCOME VISITORS

Odysseus, king of Ithaca, lay on his stomach amongst a clump of fern. Leaves and twigs were tangled in his thick, red-brown beard, and his face and hands were smeared with earth so that only the whites of his eyes were visible in the undergrowth. He remained perfectly still and silent as he looked down the slope towards a clearing in the dense woodland, where two dozen men sat around a large fire and ate stew from wooden bowls. Their features were grey and blurred in the twilight, but it was clear from their armaments and the sound of their heavily accented voices that they were not Ithacans.

‘That’s them, Eperitus,’ Odysseus whispered, nodding decisively. ‘They’re not a hunting party or a group of woodsmen – they’re the bandits we’re looking for. Can you hear what they’re saying?’

Eperitus, captain of Odysseus’s guard, lay shoulder-to-shoulder with the king. ‘Most of it,’ he replied, turning an ear towards the circle of men. Despite the distance, his acute hearing – which, like the rest of his god-gifted senses, was unnaturally sharp – could easily pick out the words of their conversation. ‘Something about a troop of dancing girls and... well, you can probably guess the rest.’ A roar of harsh laughter broke out below them. ‘They met the girls in Pylos, but from their accents it sounds like they’re Thesalians.’

‘Then they’ve a long journey back home,’ Odysseus said, watching the men thoughtfully and tapping at his teeth with a nail-bitten forefinger.

Eperitus scratched at his closely-cropped black beard. ‘The problem with that is we were told there were six of them, not four times that amount. And *we’ve* only brought twenty men with us.’

Odysseus leaned his large, muscular torso to one side and looked at his old friend, a glimmer of playful mockery in his green eyes. ‘When we landed on Samos yesterday morning you told me you were itching for a fight. In fact, hardly a month’s gone by in the past ten years when you haven’t reminisced about the old days or longed for a proper battle to come along. Now the opportunity’s arrived, all you can do is complain.’

Eperitus screwed his lips to one side and fixed his eyes on the camp below. Even though he knew Odysseus was poking fun at him the king’s words still stung. No other man on Ithaca – not even Odysseus himself – desired glory in battle as much as he did. The islanders were simple folk whose happiness was found in their homes and families, but Eperitus was an exile from a distant city who had never lost the unsettling need to prove himself. It drove everything he did, and though he had long since earned his place amongst the Ithacans he struggled to share their contentment. The handful of skirmishes he had fought in the past few years had left him hungry for a real chance of glory, and it was not until the news that a large group of bandits were terrorizing Samos – the neighbouring island to Ithaca – that he had realized how deep that hunger had eaten into him.

‘I’m not complaining,’ he replied. ‘I’m a warrior, and a warrior wants nothing more than to kill his enemies. It’s just that you’re the king, Odysseus, and I’m sworn to protect you. Zeus’s beard, if we take these lads on as we are there’s a good chance they’ll win and you’ll be killed. And just look at them: I thought brigands were supposed to be armed with daggers and rusty swords, not breastplates, shields and spears!’

He pointed to the weapons piled against the mouth of a cave at the back of the clearing, and then at the armour worn by each man and the long swords hanging from their belts. Both he and Odysseus knew that the men who had been robbing the people of Samos were not a band of disorganized thugs, stealing at need and fleeing back into the woods; they were soldiers, turned to common robbery for survival in a country where peace had reigned for a

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decade. They had arrived from the Peloponnese by ship several days before, and if they were allowed to establish themselves on Samos they would not only continue to threaten the welfare of the islanders, they would soon pose a challenge to Odysseus's own power and authority.

'Well, we need to deal with them,' the king said, resolutely. 'And I can't wait for more of the guard to be fetched from Ithaca – we have to defeat them here and now, with the men we've got.'

'What about Penelope?' Eperitus responded, noticing the look in Odysseus's eye at the mention of his beloved wife. 'She's three weeks away from giving birth to your first child, the child you've been trying for ever since you were married. This isn't the time to go risking your life.'

'I love my wife,' Odysseus said, simply but seriously. 'And no pack of outlaws is going to prevent me from returning home to her. But a king who isn't prepared to risk his life for his people isn't worthy of the title, and for the sake of my unborn son I have to live up to who I am.'

Eperitus looked at his friend and knew he had spoken truly. 'Well, evening's not far away,' he sighed, glancing up at the azure sky through the canopy of budding branches overhead. 'And there'll only be a faint moon tonight. We could bring the rest of the guard up here after dark and...'

'And kill them in cold blood? We won't need to resort to that.'

'Why not? You slit the throats of a dozen sleeping Taphians once, so what's the difference?'

'I had to do that,' Odysseus answered. 'They were invaders, whereas these poor swine,' he pointed a thumb towards the men below, 'are just soldiers fallen on hard times – warriors, like you and me. I won't kill them without giving them the chance to leave peacefully first.'

Eperitus shook his head resignedly. It was not that Odysseus was too proud to accept advice, it was just that he always thought he knew better. And he invariably did: if anyone could think of a way to defeat the bandits, it was Odysseus, the most clever, devious and resourceful man Eperitus knew.

'I assume you've got a plan,' he said.

‘Of course I have,’ the king replied with a grin. ‘Now, let’s get back to the others and tell them what we’ve seen.’

He raised himself on all fours and backed away from the screen of ferns, followed by Eperitus. Once they were sure they would not be spotted by any of the men about the campfire, they stood and quietly made their way back through the wood, picking a route between the silvery-grey trunks in the darkness. Soon they found the path they were looking for – a rutted cart track that crossed from one side of the forest to the other – and began the trek east towards their own camp.

‘I dreamed about her again last night,’ Odysseus said after a while. He was looking up at the early evening stars, which could be seen pricking the sky through the fissure in the canopy overhead.

‘Athena?’ Eperitus asked, pausing to look at the king, who avoided his eye and carried on walking. Eperitus ran to catch up with him. ‘What did she say? Was it about Penelope again?’

He knew Odysseus had long enjoyed the blessing of the goddess. As a child he had often seen her in his waking dreams, sitting on his bed at night and comforting him when he was lonely. She had once saved him from a wild boar, and when he became a man he had repaid her by making her his patron goddess. Ten years ago she had appeared before him and Eperitus on Mount Parnassus – where they had gone to seek the advice of the oracle – and then at Messene. A few months later she brought Eperitus back to life after he had died saving Odysseus from the knife of an assassin. But since then the king had seen or heard nothing of her – until she had come to him in a dream two nights ago, telling him Penelope would shortly give him a son.

‘She didn’t speak this time,’ Odysseus said. ‘We were standing on a plain under the moonlight, with the sound of the sea behind me and the smell of brine in my nostrils. Before me was a great city built on a hill. Its walls and towers were gleaming like silver, and it was both beautiful and terrible at the same time. Even though Athena was beside me the sight of that city struck me with fear and sadness, as if it were a symbol of the end of my happiness. Of all happiness.’

‘What does it mean?’

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‘I don’t know. Perhaps nothing, but I don’t think so – it left me with a feeling that doom is approaching. You remember the words of the oracle, of course: I will be king over my people for ten years, and then I will have to choose between my home and Troy. This is the tenth year of my reign, Eperitus.’

Eperitus recalled the meeting in the caverns beneath Mount Parnassus, where the priestess had spoken the prophecy that had haunted the king for so long. It was there, also, that she had told Eperitus his fate was bound up with Odysseus’s, for good or bad.

‘I haven’t forgotten the words of the Pythoness,’ Eperitus replied. ‘Yet I can’t see what will happen to force such a choice on you, or, if it comes, why you can’t just remain on Ithaca.’

But Odysseus did not reply. Before long they saw the orange light of a fire through the trees. As they approached, a man stepped out from the shadows and levelled his spear at them.

‘Not a step closer,’ he ordered, brandishing the weapon threateningly in an attempt to disguise his own nervousness. ‘Who are you and what do you want here?’

‘Apollo and Ares, come to bring death and destruction to all who stand in our way,’ Eperitus replied, pushing the point of the spear away from his chest.

The man was similar in height to Eperitus, but had short, hairy legs and a large stomach that hung down over his belt. He squinted at Eperitus through his small, pig-like eyes, then with a half-sneer of recognition raised his weapon and stepped back.

‘Oh, it’s you,’ he said with badly disguised contempt. Then, turning to Odysseus, he gave a quick bow before offering his hand. ‘Welcome back, cousin. I’m sorry I didn’t recognize you in this darkness.’

Odysseus gripped the other man’s wrist and smiled. ‘Who let you stand guard, Eurylochus? Everyone knows you’ve got the eyesight of a mole.’

Without waiting for an answer, the king clapped his cousin on the shoulder and strode off toward the welcoming light of the campfire with Eperitus at his side. They could see the figures of several men eating and drinking about the vivid orange flames, and the rich aroma of roasted meat made their mouths water in anticipation.

‘I don’t know what you’ve got in mind for dealing with those bandits,’ Eperitus said, ‘but I pray to the gods you’ll leave Eurylochus here. He should never have been allowed to come with us, Odysseus – he’s a clumsy, self-important idiot with no idea about fighting. If we’re not careful he’ll put us all in danger.’

‘Laertes insisted he come,’ Odysseus replied with an indifferent shrug, ‘and I wasn’t going to argue with my own father about the matter. Besides, if you’re lucky Eurylochus’ll get his head chopped off and you’ll never have to put up with him again.’

Eperitus ignored the comment. Eurylochus had shown him nothing but disdain since he had been made captain of the royal guard ten years ago, a position that Eurylochus, as Odysseus’s cousin and a lesser member of the royal family, felt should have been given to him by right. The fact he had skulked out of the greatest battle in Ithaca’s history – against a rebellion supported by a Taphian invasion force – did not stop him from despising Eperitus’s good fortune. Nevertheless, Eperitus did not want to see the fat fool slain needlessly.

‘And how do you intend to defeat two dozen heavily-armed warriors, assuming they refuse your invitation to peacefully return to the mainland?’ he asked as they paused at the edge of the broad clearing.

‘That’s easy,’ Odysseus answered blithely. ‘You’ve been itching for a chance of glory, Eperitus, so I’m going to send *you* to fight them.’