

CHAPTER ONE

THE SACRED TRUCE

Η Ιερή Εκχειρία

396 B.C.

The shield wall began to break almost right away, and the bragging between the two forces quickly turned to screaming as the blood flowed from the first wounds. On the edge of Ares' Dancing Floor, near Eleutherai, yet another battle had broken out.

It was the month of Thargelion, and men had already partly sated their winter's bloodlust. However, in recent years, when the memories of past alliances and betrayals still festered, when city-states still jingled purses before fighting men to gain the upper hand over their neighbours, peace was a rare thing, and bloody skirmishes the norm.

"Push forward!" yelled Stefanos, son of Talos, pentekonter on the right wing of the shield wall of Arkadian and Achaean troops. "Now!" he ordered, as he drove the three-meter shaft of his ash doru into the face of one of the men in front of him, pulling it back out of the gore for another strike. One of his opponent's spears slammed into the face of his hoplon shield, but it took the impact, the bronze and oak his constant protection over the years.

"Come on, peacock!" his opponent yelled, his voice a panting echo inside his bronze helmet as he thrust once more at the image of a lone peacock feather upon the hoplon. "We're in the land of Ares now, not of Hera!"

Stefanos ignored the personal insult to his goddess, and focussed on breaking enemy wall.

"Forward! One!" he ordered, and the right wing pushed, their shields locked perfectly, their steps in concert. "Two!" They pushed again, the voices of the men before them cracking as they stumbled backward over the rocky terrain. "Three!"

The wall of spears and shields thrust forward one more time and the enemy's left buckled like a ship's hull, groaning as it breaks over the rocks.

"We've got them!" yelled Kratos, the man on Stefanos' left.

"Let's finish this!" added the Spartan, Pollox, on Stefanos' right. "I'm hungry!" he laughed as his red cloak rippled behind him.

With one more thrust, Stefanos drove the leaf-shaped blade of his spear up into the helmet of the man who had insulted him, and then gave the order, "Wheel to the left!"

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The pentekostys turned in to hit the centre of their opponents' line, and then the real butchery started as infantry were caught between the shield walls of the centre and right as if between Scylla and Caribdis.

Stefanos, son of Talos began to laugh as the blood poured over his spear's shaft, and he stepped over the dropped hoplons of the fleeing men before him. The solid wall of the seventy two men under him gave him joy, even though some of them had fallen; he had only just met most of them, but the men he had known before still stood, the promachoi whom he commanded on that day.

"Running cowards!" Pollux yelled as he watched more of their opponents turn and run.

"They don't deserve to stand in a shield wall!" yelled Stefanos. "Finish them!" he yelled as his doru struck in and out of the bodies of men like an enraged viper with infinite venom.

Then, the sound of drums rang out over the field, the signal for an immediate halt.

"Why are we stopping?" Stefanos stood, his eyes on the remaining enemies several feet away as he turned to peer along the broken lines of bleeding, sweating, and heaving warriors.

"It's the Eleans!" someone called out from the next pentokostys, lowering his hoplon and spear, and pushing back his helmet.

Stefanos stepped out of the line and stared at the approaching line of white-clad priests and heralds who walked without fear between the two armies, their himations staining with blood and offal as they walked among the dead and dying.

"The Sacred Truce is declared!" said the lead herald, his voice high and clear above the carnage. "All hostilities are against the Gods' will, and must cease. Those competing in the Games must make their way to Olympia by the month of Skirophorion if they wish to win eternal glory. The Sacred Truce is declared!"

Stefanos stood his ground, barring the herald's way, his chest rising and falling calmly, his brown and green linothorax splattered with blood. He pushed his bronze corinthian helmet back on his head and stared at the herald and priests.

"You have a lot of nerve stepping in like this. We were almost finished," Stefanos hissed.

"No," the Elean herald said calmly. "You are finished. Now."

Stefanos leaned into the man with his blood-spattered hoplon, pushing him into the priest behind him.

"Stefanos! Let them pass! The battle is over!" yelled the lochagos from the centre of the line. "That's an order, soldier!"

Both sides stared in silence as Stefanos stood his ground, but after a few moments, the rage was leeching out of his veins.

"Come, Stefanos," came the voices of Kratos and Pollux beside him now, their

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hands on his shoulders pulling him gently out of the way. "It's over. Another victory."

Stefanos looked up at the sun, where its rays struck out from behind a cloud above the distant hills, and nodded as the herald and priests moved away from the battle, their duty done, to announce the Sacred Truce of the Olympic Games in other parts of war-torn Greece.

As the afternoon sun beat down on the gathering of men and carrion crows, both sides began to collect their dead and wounded from the field.

It had been an unplanned confrontation coming out of an accidental meeting of mercenaries, and a patrol of Theban and Attic allies. The cost had been great, but for the mercenaries on both sides, it had been another job, the last for a few months.

As the lochagoi made lists of the dead, noting their native polis, or deme if they knew it, the rest of the troops continued to pick up the bodies of the fallen and lay them in bloody rows beneath their shields.

Stefanos, son of Talos was quiet as he oversaw the men of his pentekostys. The living and the dead on that plain were faces he had seen before, fought with and against, over several years. There were many new faces too, young men, boys, for whom this had been their first engagement.

"Were we ever so young?" Kratos, Stefanos' best and long-time friend said as he came up, wiping the sweat from his brow. "Seems hard to believe."

"I suppose we were," Stefanos said. "We were also better trained."

"We had more opportunity to fight then."

"There is always a fight to be had, even during the Sacred Truce," Stefanos said, slapping Kratos on the shoulder. He stretched out his arms and rolled his head from side to side. He felt good, young and limber, despite his forty years. All of the war over the past twenty one years, including the march on foot back from the heart of Persia, had taught Stefanos and Kratos that life was meant to be taken, and lived, that kings and politicians, tyrants and philosophers did not give a damn about soldiers. The latter were pawns in the great game, and if one was going to play the game, he might as well get paid well for it.

It had been some years since they had seen their native Argos. They had actually decided that summer that they would finally return to see their families, Stefanos to see his father, Talos, the bronze smith, and his sister Cleo, a priestess of Hera at the Heraion of Argos.

Kratos longed to see his mother, and the three sisters he had left behind, beautiful women who were as tall and lean as their older brother, and were more than a match for any man. It still chafed at Kratos, the way that Stefanos had moved from one to the other of his sisters in the course of one hot Argive summer all those years ago, but the fact that they were still the best of friends and none of the girls hated Stefanos showed

how very close they were.

"You two still heading back to Argos?" Pollux said to them as he heaved the body of a fallen warrior by himself and tossed it onto the growing pile of dead, swishing away a swarm of flies with the hem of his red cloak.

Pollux had met the two older men on the march back from Persia. He threw his lot in with them, and they had been close ever since. Pollux was a Spartan through and through, and the mercenary life suited him, filled a void that was left when there were no more battles to fight. Only Sparta ever took precedence. He turned down any job that would pit him against his fellow Lacedaemonians.

Stefanos and Kratos had no such qualms about fighting against the men of their own city.

Pollux leaned his shield against the trunk of a nearby olive tree and removed his helmet, tying his curly black hair back with a leather thong. "I'll probably head back to Sparta," he said. "King Agesilaus is still in Persia, and Lysander has been sent back to Sparta to be kept out of the fight. Might be there's some opportunity there..." he mused.

"Don't get caught up in the politics, Pollux. Bad for business, you know," Kratos said.

"We're all caught up in politics," Kratos said. "It's just that Spartan politics is more fun!" he slammed his fist on the face of his hoplon which was decorated with two serpents facing each other, fangs bared.

"You three!" came the harsh voice of their Achaean lochagos. "How about you help us dig the burial mounds so we can all get out of here?"

Stefanos stood up and walked over to the man, whose bushy, greying beard sprouted out to tickle the top of his muscled cuirass.

"We're done here," Stefanos said. "We'll take our pay now."

The man reddened in the face. "What do you mean you're *done here*. No one's done here until I say. I have rank."

"And we'll have the money you owe us for the last week," Kratos added.

"Fucking mercenaries. Don't you give a damn about anyone but yourselves. We need to honour our fallen brothers."

"They're not my brothers," Stefanos said. "And yes, we do care about more than ourselves." He put his fingers to his chin. "We care about food, wine... women... Maybe boys in his case," Stefanos nodded toward Pollux who shrugged. "Did I miss anything?" he asked Kratos.

"No, I think that about covers it."

"Well, you're not getting a stater until those bodies are properly honoured," the lochagos said. "Then you'll get your pay."

Stefanos' fist flung out so quickly that the man had no time to react and was on the

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ground before he knew what had happened. When he looked up through the daze of flashing light, he could see Stefanos holding the pouch of coins that he had been carrying at his waist.

"This should about cover it, I think," Stefanos said. "Next time, just pay right away and save yourself the headache."

The three of them walked back to the group of mercenaries they had been with and distributed the pay that was owed. Once that was done, they hoisted their shields and spears, and began the long march through Megara and back into the Peloponnese, leaving the cities to clean up their own mess.