

XV • OMENS



Desperate men do desperate things. So it is in war.

The Trojans, determined to reach the ships on the other side of the ditch, pushed forward, but were held at bay by Ajax and Idomeneus. Behind them, the Greeks desperately reorganized.

The ditch was too wide for chariots to cross. Horses balked when they came to the edge. The Greeks had pounded in sharpened stakes to make the crossing even more difficult.

From behind the palisade the Greeks kept up an unending shower of arrows and stones. Bowmen shot, too, from the Trojan side, and the palisade was filled with arrows, like a porcupine with its quills clattering defiance.

Each side rained stones in flurries on their enemies. Their clatter and thunder on helmets and shields was deafening.

The Greeks had to hold. To retreat now would be to allow the Trojans onto the beach and among their ships.



The Trojans raised their shields, charged, and were repulsed again and again.

Hector and Polydamus formed a raiding party of the bravest Trojans. As they prepared to leap down into the ditch, they heard a cry from the men behind them.

Flying along their lines, high in the sky, an eagle struggled to hold on to something in its cruel claws.

As it flew closer, the men saw that the eagle held a huge, blood-red snake. The eagle's wings swung up for balance as it struck down at the writhing beast. As the eagle struck, so did the snake, fixing its fangs in the eagle's neck.

In agony, the huge bird released the snake. It dropped among the Trojans as the eagle, screaming in pain, flew away on an eddy of wind.

"Zeus is sending us a warning. . . . Zeus is turning against us. . . . The Thundermaker is on the Greek side," the men whispered fearfully as the snake writhed on the ground.

"I'm not interested in birds and snakes and so-called omens. Zeus the Thunderer has promised victory, and he is with us," Hector said, ordering the company back into battle.

At first it did seem that Zeus was still on Hector's side. He raised a wind that blew sand and dust into the faces of the Greeks as they tried to repulse the charging Trojans. Yet still the Greek defenses held.

It was the Trojan Sarpedon who showed where to make the fatal breach, by racing across the ditch and scaling the mounds of boulders that formed the base of the wall. He was followed by men determined to force back the Greek defenders.

The noise was as loud as a winter avalanche in the mountains of Crete. The defenders called on Ajax for support. He and Teucer, the bowman, began to pick off the warriors who had followed Hector across the ditch to the base of the wall. Teucer cut down men with his arrows, and Ajax smashed men's skulls and hipbones with huge boulders thrown from the top of the wall.

Yet slowly and surely the Trojans began to gain a foothold.



Along the battlements the stones were soaked with Trojan and Greek blood. It was Zeus who tipped the balance for the Trojans, and Hector yelled to his foot soldiers to tear down the huge Greek gates.

Hector leaned down to pick up a boulder no man could lift. Zeus gave him the strength. He lifted and threw. . . .

The gates ripped from their hinges, shattered by the force of the boulder. The breach filled with a chaos of men and weapons.

Hector, gripping two spears, raced for the gap with a look like nightfall. He and his men brought panic to the Greeks. They fled between their curving ships.

Hell was loose on the beaches.

