



VIII Aeneas Seeks Help from Evander

News came to Aeneas of the war-fever that was spreading through Latium. At first he would not believe that it was directed against himself. "It's impossible," he said to Achates, "King Latinus gave me his solemn pledge of friendship, not to mention his daughter's hand in marriage. And now, in a matter of days . . ."

"They say the old king has lost control. 'Turnus' is now the name on everyone's lips," replied Achates.

"I have no quarrel with this Turnus. We have never even met."

"I've heard he is a disappointed suitor," Achates said, with a rueful smile. "Unfortunately he has a large number of friends . . ."

"And we have none. You hardly need to remind me. I realised our position only too clearly when Ascanius nearly got himself killed in that village. He was very lucky that we heard the alarm."

Aeneas spent a restless, feverish night. Snatches of oracles haunted his memory. Past visions flooded his brain, all distorted, ugly, and mocking.

"Marry a Latin princess," the ghost of his wife Creusa seemed to whisper, and laughed.

"Italy is your promised home," taunted his family gods.

"Your city is marked by a litter of pigs," the seer Helenus was sniggering.

"War! The land bristles with war!" the Sibyl screamed, "Seek friends in a Greek city!"

"Help me, O gods!" Aeneas moaned, half-awake, half-delirious.

At last he slept. A peaceful figure glided into his dream, bearded, crowned with reeds, draped in watery robes. It spoke in a soft comforting voice: "Do not lose heart, Aeneas. This land is your home. I am the spirit of the River Tiber, giver of life to these fertile plains. On the shady bank of my stream you will find, as was foretold, a shining white sow, with thirty white piglets. It is a sign. When thirty years have passed, your son will build a city called Alba, which means 'white'.

"I will help you in your present trouble. Listen carefully. Not far from here is a settlement of Greeks, a town called Pallanteum, ruled by King Evander. These people are enemies of the Latins, and will gladly join forces with you. Row upstream till you find them; my current will turn and carry you along."

Aeneas woke, refreshed in mind and body. He ordered two ships to be made ready to row up the river, and wandered to the water's edge to offer a prayer to the god. The grass on the riverbank was particularly green and lush, so Aeneas could not at first see what was making a strange combination of grunts and squeals and rustling in the undergrowth. Sure enough, there lay a fat white sow, stretched out at full length, while over her ample belly clambered thirty hungry, noisy piglets.

"The gods so far keep faith, Ascanius," Aeneas said,

happily showing Iulus the sow and her litter. "But to make quite sure, we will sacrifice these to mighty Juno."

For two days, Aeneas and his picked crews rowed up the Tiber, which had become miraculously smooth and easy. They were in good spirits, and sang as they worked the oars. The weather was fine and warm, the water cool and clear, and a light breeze brought them the fresh, tingling scent of the forest.

The buildings of Pallanteum were clustered about a hill. As the Trojans approached, they could see people gathered outside the small town, and could smell the smoke and incense of a sacrifice. King Evander was presiding over a festival in honour of Hercules, who was worshipped as a local hero in Pallanteum. The ritual banquet was interrupted when the Trojan ships appeared. Everyone leapt up, exclaiming and pointing. The king's son, a youth called Pallas, immediately drew his sword and ran to the bank, calling boldly, "Who are you? Do you come in peace or war?"

Aeneas rose, and held up an olive branch for all to see: "We are Trojans. We visit you in peace. We have come to find King Evander, to make a treaty with him against our common enemy, the Latins."

Pallas sheathed his sword at once. "You are welcome, friends. Come ashore and meet my father the King."

Old King Evander had a frank, benevolent face, and his greeting was hospitable enough, and yet Aeneas stammered nervously as he began his speech. Evander was a Greek, and now the Trojans had to ask favours of him. "Sir, Fate has driven me to seek your help," he began. "I am not sorry, for I have heard of your noble character, and besides, it appears that we are related by blood.

Dardanus, the founder of Troy, was the grandson of mighty Atlas, who holds up the sky. Your ancestor, I am told, was Mercury, the gods' immortal messenger, and Mercury, as you know, is also a grandson of Atlas. Therefore your race and mine have common roots.

"If this formal speech was all I had to say, sir, I could have sent an official embassy. But I have come in person to beg for your aid. The Latins have banded together to drive us out of Italy. If you join forces with us, we may be able to beat them. We are few in number, but no weaklings in war. If you help us, we will not disappoint you."

Aeneas waited anxiously for Evander's reaction. For some time the Greek King had been staring intently at Aeneas' features, and now he exclaimed, "How like your father you are! Don't look so astonished. I remember Anchises well. Long before you were born, before that terrible war, your Trojan King, Priam, used to pay visits to his sister in Greece. Your father always travelled with him, and they made a regular stop at our home in Arcadia. I was a young fellow then, younger than Pallas here, and Anchises was my special hero. He was the tallest and bravest of all the Trojan party. I remember how I used to hang around, hoping he would notice me. One day he did; he shook my hand, and gave me presents before he left: a quiver, a cloak with gold embroidery, and a pair of golden bridles. I still treasure them; my son Pallas uses them now.

"So, son of Anchises, don't speak to me of begging for aid! Here is my hand, and my everlasting friendship. We'll talk business tomorrow; tonight you must join our feast."

While they were eating and drinking, King Evander explained to the Trojans why his people paid honour to

Hercules: "He rid this place of a horrific, fire-breathing ogre, known by the name of Cacus, who used to live in a cave in that mountain there, terrorising the countryside for miles around.

"The story is that Hercules was passing through this area, on the way back from one of his famous Labours, driving a herd of cattle. As soon as the greedy ogre smelled the herd, he crept out of his lair and hauled off four bulls and four cows by their tails, and walled them up in his cave. The poor beasts moored in terror, and brought Hercules rushing to the cliffside, brandishing his enormous club of knotted wood. But what was he to do? There was no way in. Three times he ran round the mountain, roaring with rage, looking for an opening, but there was none. Finally, he climbed the side of the cliff, leaned against the peak, took a deep breath, and pushed with all his might. There was a tremendous crack, and the top of the mountain, boulders, trees, soil and all, tumbled into the valley below.

"Hercules could now see straight down into the ogre's den, where his cattle were imprisoned, but he could not reach to pull them out. In vain he flung rocks down on Cacus, who retorted by belching out clouds of flame and smoke that turned the mountain into a fiery volcano. Hercules could not bear the creature's insolence; he leapt down into the cave, and after a struggle that shook the earth until the forest shifted and the river overflowed its banks, he strangled the ogre with his bare hands. Then he pushed out the rock that was wedged in the cave's entrance, and set his cattle free.

"Once Cacus was dead, the whole region flourished.



And that is why we pay tribute to Hercules, Jupiter's mighty son."

The Trojans listened to the legend with great admiration, and Aeneas resolved to make the worship of Hercules a tradition in his own kingdom.

As King Evander escorted Aeneas to the town after the feast, he pointed out various landmarks, and told his guest something of the history of the area: "They say the god Saturn ruled here once and that in his time the people led such peaceful, pure and honest lives that the period was called the Golden Age. But gradually men grew wicked and greedy, and life became harsh. You see how we live today, Aeneas, beset by wars and a constant struggle for survival."

A strange feeling of awe had possessed Aeneas: "What is that hill there, Evander, with a thick wood on the very top? It has a look of majesty, I think. Does it have a name?"

"You are not the first to sense its character, Aeneas. I have heard it called the hill of Jupiter; some people claim that on a dark and stormy day you can see the god poised on the crest, shaking his thunderbolts."

Aeneas could not know that he was looking at the site of the Capitol, one day to be the citadel of Rome and the centre of an empire. He only felt, long after they had entered King Evander's simple house, a strong desire to visit that hill again. But it was late, and there was much to do.

That night the goddess Venus crept softly to the sleeping form of her husband, Vulcan, and kissed him tenderly. It was not something she often did: Vulcan, the fire-god who, with incredible skill, fashioned jewellery and weapons for the other gods and goddesses, was ugly, lame and

deformed. Venus had been forced to marry him against her will. Vulcan loved her desperately and hopelessly; her endless number of admirers, mortal and divine, kept him in a constant fever of jealousy.

"Darling," Venus was now murmuring in his ear, "will you do just one small favour for me? I have never asked you for anything before, not even when my precious Troy was going up in flames."

"That's half the trouble," Vulcan grumbled. "You don't think I'm any use for anything. If you wanted me to help the Trojans, why didn't you ask? I have been known to produce a weapon or two!"

"How clever of you to guess what I was thinking of!" Venus exclaimed, nestling close to him and rubbing her cheek against his. "My son, Aeneas, is about to fight a terrible battle against overwhelming numbers of Latins. You once supplied a set of armour for the Greek Achilles; will you do as much for my son? Do you promise?"

Vulcan did not think of refusing. Delighted at the chance to please his beautiful wife, he shambled off to his underground smithy, deep in the bowels of volcanic Mount Etna. In that immense workshop the labourers were Cyclopes, the enormous one-eyed giants, who toiled unceasingly to fulfil the demands of the gods. Night and day the cavern was filled with hammering, bubbling, hissing, and clanking as metals were melted and twisted and forced into a thousand shapes.

Vulcan paused in the high doorway, and nodded in approval at the scene of industry. At one end of the workshop three giants were assembling Jupiter's thunderbolts; the king of the gods needed a continuous supply. In other areas special orders were being completed

— a war-chariot for Mars, and an elaborate shield for Minerva.

The fire-god struck a massive gong. Except for the bubbling of the cauldrons, all noise ceased. The Cyclopes dropped their hairy, sweating arms and lifted their brutish faces to their master.

"Attention! All hands to an urgent job. A set of armour fit for a hero. The best you can do, a top-class effort! It's a special order from the goddess Venus." The workers smirked, winked grotesquely with their single eyes, and lumbered off to obey.

At first light, Evander and Aeneas, accompanied by Achates and young Pallas, were settling down in serious conference. "I have thought carefully about the best plan of action," Evander began. "I only wish we Arcadians could be more help to you, Aeneas. But as you can see for yourself, our numbers are few and we are hemmed in by the Latins. However, there is a good chance of getting yourself a very strong ally, if you are prepared to move fast."

"Just tell me how," Aeneas responded at once.

"The Etruscans live a short distance from here. They used to be ruled by a tyrant called Mezentius, more like a monster than a man. He openly defied the gods, and his favourite hobby was devising new forms of hideous torture. Then there was a rebellion. Mezentius somehow escaped alive, along with his son Lausus, and took refuge with our mutual friend, the noble Turnus. The Etruscans are still thirsting for revenge, and at this very moment are camped in arms, intending to force Turnus to surrender his guest to justice."

Aeneas looked at Achates, who smiled and nodded.

“They would surely combine forces with us.”

“They are bound to, Aeneas. For they have heard an oracle saying that they must find a commander for this war who is not Italian-born. They even approached me, but I am too old for active service. You are the very man they need, Aeneas. You will surely lead a triumphant army against Turnus and the Latins.”

Aeneas was already buckling on his sword-belt. “May the gods reward you, Evander. I’ll leave at once for the Etruscan camp.”

“Wait one moment more. I said I would help you as much as I could. Four hundred Arcadian cavalry, fully equipped, are ready to escort you. And to show you the faith I have in your success, I am sending Pallas along to serve as your squire.”

The youth jumped up and hugged his father joyfully. “I can really fight?”

“The day had to come, my son. You could have no better model than Aeneas. Watch him carefully, and do exactly as you are told. I hope you will prove a soldier.”

Aeneas and Achates, both seasoned warriors, smiled at the enthusiasm of the young recruit, but the glances they exchanged were serious. The day of battle was very near; no one could tell whose blood would flow before it ended, or whose the victory would be.

The preparations were quickly made. Old King Evander took leave of Pallas. He had intended to send him off with a rousing, patriotic speech, but he forgot the words he had carefully composed, and wept and clung to the youth like any ordinary father, begging the gods to protect his son from harm.

Aeneas selected a small band of Trojans to accompany

him to the Etruscan stronghold, and despatched the rest in the ships to report to Iulus. In a few hours Aeneas, with Achates on one side and Pallas on the other, was riding through the guardposts of the Etruscan camp and admiring the obvious size and strength of their army. King Tarchon, a dark, stocky man who rarely smiled, was waiting at the doorway of his headquarters. He received the Trojans and their escort briskly, taking their alliance for granted, and assigned them to lodgings in his camp.

Venus waited till Aeneas was alone, and then appeared before him, carrying the most magnificent set of armour he had ever seen. She did not stay to hear his amazement or his thanks, but soared into the clouds and disappeared. Gingerly at first, Aeneas picked up the weapons that glittered at his feet. The helmet had plumes the colour of flame. He flourished the sword and the spear, testing their weight and balance. The breastplate was fashioned from dark bronze, almost blood-coloured; the greaves, fitting his legs exactly, were gold inlaid with amber.

Last of all, he raised the shield, and gazed at its design in wonder. The surface was covered with figures and famous scenes from the future history of Rome, the nation that would spring from Aeneas’ people. He stroked the metal gently, admiring the skill of the master-craftsman, and puzzling over the variety of scenes and actions. He was fascinated by the vigour and energy that shone from each figure.

There lay a she-wolf, fondling two baby boys, the twins Romulus and Remus; next to it a crowd of Sabine women struggled to escape from the Roman youths carrying them off; the hero Horatius, single-handed, guarded the bridge across the Tiber; on the Capitol Hill, a goose flapped its

wings in alarm as a line of Gauls, knives between their teeth, scaled the cliff to attack Rome's citadel. There were parades of priests and ladies, and scenes of criminals in torment. A sea-battle was in full swing, on a sea of silver and gold. One fleet of bronze ships was commanded by the gleaming figure of Caesar Augustus, the other by Mark Antony and Cleopatra, queen of Egypt.

The final scene showed a long procession of conquered nations, from every corner of the earth. Surrounded by altars and offerings, the Emperor Augustus sat calmly surveying them from a shining throne, and accepted their tribute.

Aeneas laughed in delight. He could not understand these scenes, set in the distant future, but he swung the shield onto his left arm. Its size and weight were exactly right.