



X Aeneas Joins the Battle

"I HAVE summoned you all," Jupiter announced, "to settle this abominable strife that is tearing apart the peaceful land of Latium." In the great hall of Olympus, walled with cloud and roofed with a thousand stars, the immortal gods sat in council.

"This is not the time decreed for war," rumbled the king of the gods. "That time will come, when the fierce troops of Carthage will ravage Italy and threaten the walls of mighty Rome. But not yet, not now! Trojans and Latins have no real cause to quarrel. This war must cease!"

Ceres, the corn-goddess, agreed with an approving, motherly smile: "My fields are looking dreadfully neglected. I'm afraid there won't be much of a harvest in Latium, but by next year . . ."

"Nonsense!" Mars broke in. "Toughen them up a bit! What use is a race of weaklings?"

"Silence!" Jupiter roared above the outbreak of comment. "We are not here for a general debate. I have said . . ."

"Father, listen to me." Venus clasped her hands imploringly and gazed at him as only she could do. "Father, look at the plight of the Trojans. They are prisoners in their own camp, valiantly defending their lives, while Turnus

flaunts himself on the battlefield like a hero, knowing full well that Aeneas is away. But is this the will of Fate — that Troy should perish a second time? Have you forgotten how the ships were nearly burnt in Sicily? You had to save them yourself, father. What about the storm and the shipwreck at Carthage? Who brought that about?"

"Someone with no business to be meddling in my kingdom," growled Neptune. Juno remained silent.

"We all know who it was," Venus continued. "And now, since heaven and earth can't help her any more, she has gone so far as to call on the hellish fiend Allecto to stir up strife in Latium. This is too much! What use was the escape from Troy and the years of suffering and hope if, after all, the Trojans are butchered by Turnus? My little grandson, Ascanius — is there no future for him? Father, I appeal to you, can the sacred decrees of Fate be blotted out at the whim of one spiteful goddess?"

"Hypocrite!" Juno had risen now. "Who caused the Fall of Troy? Who sent the Trojan Paris to elope with Helen of Sparta? You! You should have thought of your precious Trojans a little sooner. And now that Aeneas has invaded a foreign land — don't you quote Fate at me! — aren't the owners entitled to defend it? Is Turnus to stand meekly by while he is cheated of his rightful bride? When you use your powers to save Aeneas, that's fine! But if I lift a finger to help Turnus, whose mother is divine and whose family tree is not to be sneered at — if I help him, then I am wicked and spiteful!"

"Order!" Jupiter's deep voice stilled the general clamour. "All of you, hear my pronouncement. Since it has come to pass, for whatever reason, that Trojans and Latins are waging war in Italy, I, the king of gods and men,

declare myself impartial. Let each nation do its best; I view them both alike, and leave the result to Fate.”

Meanwhile, the Trojans were finding it harder and harder to defend their camp. Their numbers were small; when a man died on the wall, there was none to take his place. The enemy, in contrast, brought up fresh troops in hundreds, wave after wave. The camp was ringed with fire. Most of the watch-towers had crumbled. The young son of Aeneas was back at the wall, firing arrows thick and fast at the enemy, but now no one urged him away. Every pair of hands was needed. No one said it, but they were all praying that Aeneas would return before it was too late.

In fact, Aeneas was not far away. Tarchon, the Etruscan leader, had proved prompt and efficient. It was quickest, he had said, to transport the army by sea, except for the main force of Arcadian cavalry who were despatched overland. And so, at the very hour of night when Nisus was proposing his ill-fated plan, they had embarked, thirty vessels and a good five thousand men. Etruscans and allies alike, all had accepted Aeneas as their commander.

The night was still. In a graceful line, the fleet moved southwards along the coast. The leading ship, marked by its lion-shaped prow, contained the small Trojan force, a number of Arcadian horsemen, and Aeneas himself, who stood at the helm with young Pallas, explaining to him how to steer by the stars. The night wore on, until at last only Aeneas and the oarsmen were still awake.

The Trojan hero was glad to steer the ship, for he was too worried to sleep. The steady beat of the oars and the ripple of the sea were beginning to calm his nerves, when suddenly, all around the ship, he heard leaps and splashes and voices calling his name.

He spun round in alarm, to see a shapely maiden swinging from the stern-rail, her wet body shimmering in the moonlight. “Don’t be startled, Aeneas,” she said. “We’re your friends, my sisters and I. We were once your ships, which you built from Mount Ida’s sacred pinetrees. Turnus tried to burn us at our moorings, but the Great Mother came to our rescue. She turned us into sea-nymphs and we swam away. Now we have urgent news for you. Your son is in grave danger. Turnus has besieged the Trojan camp, knowing you are not there. He plans to attack at dawn with an enormous army. You must hurry, Aeneas. Your men cannot hold out for long. We will help you make good speed; you will reach the Tiber at daybreak. But be ready to fight for your life!” She dropped back into the waves with a splash. Aeneas gripped the tiller hard, and the ship shot forward like an arrow, propelled by superhuman force.

When the first rays of dawn touched the waves, Aeneas roused his men from sleep and ordered them to arm themselves. As they neared the Tiber’s mouth, the din of battle reached them clearly over the water.

Aeneas, a dazzling figure in the armour of Vulcan, stood ready on the deck. As soon as he sighted the Trojan camp, he raised his splendid shield, and flashed it in the sunlight. From the distant camp came an answering cheer.

Turnus, fresh from his exploits within the Trojan defences, looked round and saw the line of ships, their decks glittering with weapons. “Well, men, here’s the chance we’ve been waiting for,” he called to his troops. “You have all been saying you wanted a chance to fight in the open, instead of dodging round this chicken-coop. Let’s meet them on the beach. Remember, it’s our land they’re

invading, our wives and children they'll kidnap and murder, if we let them. Every man to his post!"

Aeneas waited till the keels scraped the sand, then ordered the gangways to be lowered. From thirty ships came a rattle of heavy chains and a creaking of hinges. "All ashore!" was the next command, and the waist-deep water became a threshing turmoil of men and armour. Not all made a graceful landing: Tarchon's ship struck a hidden reef, broke its keel and, plummeting violently, threw its crew overboard in confusion.

From the ranks of waiting Latins the war-trumpets brayed defiantly. Turnus held his troops in check, letting the enemy stagger awkwardly through the shallows and up the muddy sand, weighed down with sword, shield, spears and body-armour.

Aeneas led the battle-charge, with faithful Achates close by his side. Not since the last days of Troy had they engaged in serious fighting, but their skills were practised and their weapons keen. Beginning with sword and shield, Aeneas cut a deadly path through the enemy ranks. Spears were hurled at him in dozens, but they bounced harmlessly away from his shining armour. Two huge men lunged at him with clubs; he struck them both to the ground. Sheathing his sword, he took from Achates a bundle of spears. His aim was true: each spear found a tender mark, piercing the thickest breastplates of bronze and leather.

Meantime, young Pallas, with a small escort of mounted Arcadians, had swum his horse to land. He intended to skirt the throng of battling footsoldiers, and make contact with the main company of Arcadian cavalry which had made the journey overland. But the path up from the beach was steep and rough, and they had to dismount, and

lead the horses. No sooner had they reached level ground than they found themselves faced with a large and menacing enemy band. There was no time to mount.

"Shall we charge, sir?" With a thrill of fear Pallas realized that the grey-haired soldier was addressing him. Though completely untried in battle, he was now in command. He ran his tongue over his lips, knotted his trembling fingers round his spear-shaft and called, "Men of Pallanteum, our only hope is attack! Follow me!"

He rushed at the enemy. A man blocked his way, grinning, with a huge boulder aimed at his head. Pallas caught him in the ribs with his spear, and as he fell, wrenched the weapon free. The man's breath gurgled from him as he died. His comrade dashed at Pallas with sword and shield; the young man ducked, and drove his blade upwards deep into the fellow's lungs.

After this, there was no hanging back. Pallas struck and parried blow after blow. His Arcadian troops, though not used to fighting on foot, took their courage from him, and pressed bravely through the jostling ranks.

Cleaving a path through Etruscans and Arcadians came Lausus, son of the ex-tyrant, Mezentius. Unlike his vicious father, Lausus was a frank-faced, popular youth. His bravery and leadership in battle were already well proven, and he was a useful captain in Turnus' army. Pallas drew level with him, and the two young men circled each other, watching for a chance to strike. They were about equal in age and build, and might have been friends if their fates had been different.

The soldiers on both sides fell back a little, seeing their young leaders braced for a duel. Resting their spears, like a

crowd at a sporting-match, they began to urge on their champions by name.

Suddenly there was a commanding shout, "Leave Pallas to me!" and speeding through the throng in a resplendent chariot came Turnus. He jumped to the ground and addressed his enemy: "Get ready to die, my boy. I only wish I had your father Evander here to see."

Pallas looked up at the massive shoulders and the flamboyant crest that towered above him, and answered, "I wish he was here, too. Because then he could see me kill you, Turnus, or else die like a glorious warrior myself."

The spectators gasped as Pallas gripped his spear and stepped to meet his fate, crying on Hercules, his patron, to protect him. He balanced the shaft, and threw. The spear flew fast, clipped the edge of Turnus' shield, and grazed his shoulder. Since he had no second spear, Pallas drew his sword and crouched behind his shield as Turnus took aim.

The spear that Turnus threw was made of heavy oak, with a head of steel. With the force of a mighty arm to drive it, it whistled through the air and pierced right through shield and breastplate into the flesh of Pallas. He reeled, staring dumbly at the spear-head that pinned his shield to his chest; then jerked his left arm and tore the weapon out. The blood came in a gush, and he fell forward.

Turnus rolled Pallas' body face up with his foot. "Tell King Evander," he said to the Arcadians, "that this is his reward for making friends with Aeneas." He bent over the corpse, unfastened Pallas' gold-embossed sword-belt, and slinging it over his shoulder, he stepped into his chariot and drove off.

A runner brought the news to Aeneas: Pallas was dead.

The Trojan leader stopped in the midst of the raging battle, and a terrible look came over his face. He remembered Pallas scampering down to the river bank to meet his ships, and King Evander's ready hospitality. He felt again the clasp of the old man's hand and heard his quavering voice and his tears as he entrusted his only son to the Trojans.

Aeneas had been fighting like a soldier, determined and brave, but now he fought like a madman. "Take these alive!" he roared at Achates, as a terrified group retreated before his slashing sword. "I'll sacrifice them to Pallas later!" A Latin called Magus, ducking his spearthrust, fell at his feet and sobbed for mercy, promising as ransom everything he owned. Aeneas looked down at him, and imagined young Pallas kneeling before the mocking figure of Turnus; he grabbed Magus by his helmet-strap and slit his throat.

A chariot with two drivers crashed through the fray and bore down on Aeneas. With a bloodcurdling war-cry he ran straight at the horses. One of the drivers felt the point of his spear; the other he dragged to the ground and beheaded. The rearing horses threw up dust in clouds.

On high Olympus, Jupiter, with frowning brow, was observing the battle. He noted that the Trojan camp was no longer besieged, that Turnus was rallying all his forces to resist the havoc spread by Aeneas' onslaught. The king of the gods addressed his wife Juno, "You must not blame Venus. You can see for yourself the terrible damage Aeneas has wrought single-handed. The Trojans themselves have shown fierce courage, and the credit for victory must be their own."

"My lord," Juno answered, with unusual meekness, "you

needn't tell me – I can see it all too well. Please, dear husband, grant me one favour. I know I can't save Turnus for ever, but let me keep him from harm for just a little while. He is a good man; he has often paid homage to you. A breathing-space, my lord, please!"

"Now, Juno," said Jupiter sternly, "you must understand, once and for all, that you cannot alter the result of this war. If all you have in mind is a short respite for Turnus, well and good; but if you have any further designs, you may as well give them up now."

Juno did not stay for further discussion. She slipped down to Latium, wrapped in cloud, and landed invisible among the fighters. Then, seizing handfuls of air and mist, she deftly fashioned a likeness of Aeneas with his exact dress and features. She breathed a spell, and the phantom moved and spoke according to her will, but in Aeneas' manner and voice. It strode up to Turnus, and shouted a challenge.

Turnus reacted immediately, hurling his spear. Although his aim was perfect, his target seemed unhurt. It turned away, and began to run. "Stand and fight, you coward!" Turnus roared, and raced in pursuit.

Through the thick of the battle scurried the phantom-Aeneas, till it reached the shore where the ships were beached. With a noiseless leap it boarded the nearest, and vanished among the rigging and sails. Close on its heels came Turnus. "You won't escape now!" he jeered, kicking obstacles aside and slashing at ropes. "What's the matter? Have you decided to give up your claims to my land? I'll give you a plot of land, free – just your size!"

Juno, hovering over the beach, gave the stern of the ship a mighty push. Exclaiming in alarm, Turnus ran to the rail,

but already the water below was deep. All around the air was still; yet the sails were full, and the ship streaked over the water like a bird in flight.

Three times Turnus tried to dive overboard, but each time Juno held him back. In tears of rage, he cried to the gods: "You have destroyed my name and honour! How can I ever face my people again, after deserting them in a battle? Send me a quick death now, away from their sight!" The ship sped on regardless, till it reached the coastal town where his elderly father lived, and there it came to rest.

The Latins and their allies were bewildered by the disappearance of Turnus, but they were not long without a leader. Mezentius was quick to assume command. With his son Lausus close behind, he began a riot of slaughter more savage than any seen so far.

The Etruscans, now part of Aeneas' army, had by no means forgotten the hatred for Mezentius that had prompted them to join with the Trojans. Every one of them had mourned the death of a father, a brother, or a son who had suffered horribly at the tyrant's hands. Now they closed in on Mezentius, howling like beasts for his blood.

Mezentius stood quite still before the cursing mob, and his eyes taunted them over the rim of his shield. He did not appear to notice the missiles that rained down on his head and shoulders. Then, with a hideous laugh, he began to kill, picking out individuals by name and dealing out a brutal death to each. One had his head smashed with a boulder; another was hamstrung and left huddled over legs that could no longer stand. No one dared to come within reach of that flashing sword, and when Mezentius began to step forward, the Etruscans backed away.

Aeneas, still hot for revenge on Turnus, emerged from the tumult of the battle to see Mezentius driving before him a pack of terrified soldiers, hypnotized by his swinging blade and mocking laughter. At the same moment, Mezentius caught sight of Aeneas. "Watch this!" he called to his son Lausus. "See that fine suit of armour Aeneas is wearing – I'll present it to you. I swear by my favourite god, which is my own right arm!"

He cast his spear at Aeneas, but the dazzling shield knocked it aside. Now Aeneas took a pace forward, searching his enemy for an unprotected target. There was none: Mezentius was covered from head to foot, and held an enormous shield. Aeneas drew a deep breath, and threw with all his strength. His spear struck the centre of Mezentius' shield, cut through the layers of bronze and fabric and the triple leather lining, and pierced him low in the belly. The Etruscans cheered to see the tyrant wounded, and roared in excitement as Aeneas drew his sword and rushed at their hated enemy.

That would have been the end of Mezentius, but for the courage of his son. Lausus dashed in, intercepted the fatal blow, and covered his father with his own shield. Together they faced Aeneas, Lausus yelling defiance and battering the Trojan leader with a shower of stones.

"Get out of the way, boy!" Aeneas shouted. "You're no match for me!" Lausus shrieked an insult. But a moment later, he was writhing on the ground, his tunic soaked in blood, his cheeks drained of colour.

Aeneas looked at the gasping lad, and imagined Iulus in such a state. His fury turned to sympathy. "Poor boy," he said softly, stroking the dying youth's hand. "You fought like a man. Keep your armour and weapons. Your friends

will be able to boast that you died by the sword of Aeneas."

A few yards away, Mezentius was recovering breath. His bodyguard stood by him, bathing his face with water and staunching his wound, while the tyrant cried for news of his son. When he was told, he pulled himself upright despite his searing pain, and called for his horse. "Lift me up to the saddle," he ordered, "and give me my spears. Lausus died for my crimes. He never deserved exile. The Etruscans loved him – he could have stayed at home. But he chose to share my fate."

Two soldiers lifted him into the saddle and handed him his spears. He patted the horse gently, murmuring its name. It whinnied at the familiar voice, and galloped straight into battle.

"Aeneas!" Mezentius bellowed. "Aeneas!" His third call brought the Trojan hero out of the crowd. "Did you think I would let my child die in my place? Take these on his behalf!"

He wheeled at a dizzy pace around Aeneas as he spoke, and threw spear after spear till all were gone. Aeneas spun and dodged, until the ground at his feet and the surface of his shield were bristling with shafts. Then he raised his own spear, sprang high off the ground, and stabbed Mezentius' horse in the forehead. The animal gave a pitiful scream and reared, unseating its master. Then it crashed to the ground on top of Mezentius and lay still.

As Aeneas drew his sword, the Etruscan tyrant gasped, "Don't waste time. Just one favour: protect my body from the Etruscans, and bury me with Lausus. Now strike!"

The sword severed his throat.