

Chapter 1

The Pass of Thermopylae, northern Greece, autumn 1309

Luca had expected the Duchy of Athens to be warmer than Gallipoli for some reason. Everyone had told him Greece was a place of eternal sun, olives, wine and learned men in white robes with long beards. Today the sun was conspicuous by its absence, a desultory drizzle coming from the mist-shrouded mountains to soak the Catalan Company camped in the famous pass where three hundred Spartans had stood against tens of thousands of Persians seventeen hundred years before. King Leonidas and his Spartans had fought the Persians in the summer heat when the sun had glinted off the whetted spear points of the king of king's royal guard, but today the air was damp and the temperature cool.

After its adventures in Macedonia where the company had faced and defeated the duplicity of Empress Irene and had briefly laid siege to the city of Thessalonica, the empress' seat of power, the mercenaries had ended their siege and marched south in the direction of Athens to present themselves to their new employer – Walter of Brienne, Duke of Athens. The march from Thessalonica through the Kingdom of Thessaly had been a leisurely affair, not least because the Catalans had destroyed the army of Thessaly, had captured its young king and had planned to sell him to his future mother-in-law, Empress Irene, for a huge sum of money. Instead, the company had swapped the King of Thessaly for a lowly, illiterate Almogavar whose monetary value was worthless, but who was worth more than his weight in gold as he was the company's lucky talisman.

Luca Baldi, the man saved from a grisly death in Thessalonica, placed an arm around the shoulder of the woman who had saved his life by rousing the company to forgo the ransom for the King of Thessaly for the life of the Black Sheep. The company had heard her plea, much to the annoyance of Hector, the company's commander. Yet here they all were, safe and sound and standing in the pass of Thermopylae, listening to the knight responsible for holding the pass against the enemies of the Latin states of Greece.

Luca planted a delicate kiss on the cheek of his beloved, causing her to smile and lay her head on his shoulder. Life was good, a new challenge beckoned and he was back in the arms of his woman and the embrace of the Catalan Company. The mercenary camp was planted in the centre of the pass, between the high cliffs of Zestano and the grey waters of the Malian Gulf. Even Luca could see that the pass was a naturally defensive position. He did not know the names of the mountains that came close in to the sea, on the other side of which was the island of Euboea, with a narrow channel between the island and the mainland. The brutal grandeur of

the mountains was increased by the damp air and grey skies, the mist obscuring the tops of the rugged terrain adding to their imposing appearance.

‘This is where the Spartans made their last stand against the Persians.’

Luca turned away from the mountains to look at their self-styled guide. Albert Pallavicini, Marquis of Bodonitsa, was not a particularly tall individual but he was imposing. His round face was framed by a black beard and balding hair, his complexion ruddy, his shoulders wide and his hands strong and easily able to wield the expensive sword at his hip in a velvet-covered scabbard with enamelled coats-of-arms on the gilded mounts. That coat of arms – alternating blue and yellow squares – was also stitched on to the pristine yellow surcoat he was wearing, under which he wore a short-sleeved mail hauberk. The mail coif that would normally be protecting his head and neck had been removed and now lay on the back of his shoulders.

‘The Spartans,’ continued the marquis, ‘exhausted and surrounded, were given the chance to surrender by the tyrant Xerxes, the so-called king of kings of the Persian Empire. But the Spartan leader scorned his offer, and when the emissary related Xerxes’ warning that he had so many archers that when they shot their arrows they would block out the sun, Leonidas replied that he and his men would fight in the shade.’

Hector emitted a raucous laugh, much to the delight of the marquis. He, Luca and the others were standing on top of a small hillock at the eastern end of the pass, gazing towards the west where the three-day battle had taken place hundreds of years before. Luca did not understand how a mere three hundred man could defend a wide pass without being easily outflanked. Hector was also thinking the same because he pointed towards where the Catalan encampment had been established.

‘There is no way on God’s earth that three hundred soldiers could defend this pass. There must have been other troops to supplement their numbers.’

The marquis chuckled knowingly.

‘The Spartans were reinforced by contingents from the other Greek states, but even with the addition of a few thousand their forces were still vastly outnumbered by the Persians. The pass was much narrower at the time of the battle, around twenty paces at its narrowest point. The sea has retreated over the centuries. And yet, despite their overwhelming numerical superiority, the Persians could only overcome the Greeks by luck.’

Hector’s ears pricked up. ‘Luck?’

The marquis pointed at the mountain on their left.

‘As you can see, Mount Kallidromos is heavily forested and though it contains many tracks and paths of varying widths, it is easy to lose one’s way. But Xerxes sent his Immortals, his

personal bodyguard, to search the area and they found a way to cross the mountain and get behind the Greeks. The result was their annihilation on the hill we now stand on.’

‘That is not quite correct.’

The marquis turned to stare at Ayna, the exotic black-haired young woman with a lithe figure that he assumed was the slave of the one they called the Black Sheep, the peasant who had once served him wine after he had been escorted to Hector’s Turkish pavilion in the centre of the sprawling Catalan camp. And now she dared to open her mouth in his presence, he who was a member of the Pallavicini family, which had been Italian nobility for over two hundred years.

He looked at Hector and then at the commander of his horsemen, Alfonso of Navarre, who was obviously not a knight judging by the lack of coat of arms on his red surcoat and his rather shabby appearance.

Appearance was everything for Albert Pallavicini and men of his class. Christian knights took immense pride and care in their appearance, especially when it came to military equipment. The more expensive and lavish his arms and armour, the greater a knight’s reputation, allied to his prowess on the battlefield. Rusty armour and poor-quality weapons were considered a personal disgrace. Everything about the Marquis of Bodonitsa shouted wealth and privilege. His surcoat was decorated with gold thread, he wore gilded iron spurs and on his legs domed iron poleyn knee protectors and golden leather cuisses over his chausses – mail stockings – to protect his shins.

Similarly, the marquis’ horse was an expensive beast, though its white coat with black spots might have led some to believe it was an unusual mount for a high-ranking knight. Alfonso had told Luca the animal was a Jennet, a specific kind of palfrey, which was a horse trained to trot at an ambling pace, thus giving the person sitting in the saddle a comfortable ride. And the Jennets bred in the lands to the south of Catalonia were considered the finest and most prized of the palfrey breed. The Jennet of the marquis had a medium-sized head, deep chest and a strong back, being short in the body and long in the leg. Alfonso was very impressed, telling Luca the Jennet was the choice of kings and royalty off the battlefield. On the battlefield the Marquis of Bodonitsa would ride a destrier or warhorse, the mighty stallions easily able to carry a knight in full armour.

‘She is allowed to speak in your presence?’

Ayna’s eyes narrowed and she bristled with indignation.

‘Why should I not speak?’ she said in flawless Italian, the language the marquis was speaking as a courtesy to the Catalans.

The official language of the Latin states in Greece was French and as a noble he was fluent in that language, his mother tongue, as well as Greek and Latin.

‘We are all equal in the company,’ added Luca.

The marquis raised an eyebrow. Nobles were equal, but glorified shepherds and their camp followers were inferior to anointed knights in every way. But the Duke of Athens had sent a letter asking Albert to welcome the Catalan Company into his lands and to provide them with food during what he hoped would be a brief stay. When he had first clapped eyes on them he had wanted to laugh, especially the Almogavars in their poor sheepskin coats and linen clothes. But the reputation they established in Sicily and latterly in the Roman Empire was not to be lightly dismissed, and so he treated Hector and Alfonso as equals. The curtesy did not extend to the one they called the Black Sheep and his impudent infidel wench.

Hector nodded his head at Ayna.

‘Ayna here is Persian, so she has a keen interest in what her ancestors got up to.’

The marquis was surprised and in truth a little intrigued. He noted the dagger at her hip, her sensual good looks and what was obviously a fine body, albeit one dressed in poor attire. He decided to indulge her for the sake of diplomacy.

‘Perhaps you would care to enlighten us.’

‘The Greeks were betrayed by one of their own to lead the Immortals through the mountain,’ said Ayna. ‘The trail was called the Anopaea and was known to the Greek King Leonidas, who placed soldiers to guard it. But it was not a narrow track but a broad path. How else would ten thousand Immortals be able to cross the mountain in a single night?’

‘How do you know this?’ asked the marquis, surprised a woman, let alone a heathen, would be so knowledgeable.

‘In Persia we take great pride in our history,’ replied Ayna. ‘And the Battle of Thermopylae was a great Persian victory.’

Hector was now intrigued.

‘I would like to see this path.’

‘It can be arranged,’ said the marquis. ‘I can send a guide to show you the way.’

‘I accept.’

‘Who are the Immortals?’ asked Luca.

‘The royal bodyguard of the kings of Persia,’ Ayna told him. ‘They were called Immortals because their number was always maintained at ten thousand. If one fell in battle he was immediately replaced.’

‘And yet, the Persians were defeated at the Battle of Plataea a few weeks later and Persia never again attempted to invade Greece, and a few decades later it fell to Alexander of Macedon,’ gloated the marquis.

‘It is true,’ conceded Ayna, ‘but after the battle in this pass, the Persians advanced south and destroyed Athens. Let us hope the current owner of the city does not suffer the same fate.’

The marquis was not amused. ‘What!’

‘Apologies, my lord,’ said Hector. ‘You know what these eastern types are like. No manners.’

Albert gave Ayna an icy glare but she merely turned her eyes away from him. She saw no reason to feel apologetic for voicing an observation. When Luca had returned from his serving duties to inform her the ruler of the land they were in, who was called a marquis, whatever that meant, had extended an invitation to the commanders of the Catalan Company to be shown the sites of the Battle of Thermopylae, she had badgered him to get Hector to allow her to be one of the party. And he was to join her as it would be good for his education. Luca was doubtful he would be allowed to attend because it would be an event for the company’s leaders, not a lowly Almogavar and his woman. But the Almogavar captains had better things to do than be lectured by a noble and excused themselves. Melek Kose and Halil Ece also turned down the offer, Melek stating ‘one battlefield was much like another’. Hector begged Alfonso to attend, who reluctantly agreed, and was delighted when Luca and Ayna volunteered to listen to Albert Pallavicini. Hector explained to the marquis that Luca was the lucky talisman of the company and was known throughout the Roman Empire. The marquis was sceptical but instantly noted the ivory-handled dagger at Luca’s hip, which pointed to the Almogavar being a notch above the average, which compared to the rest of the company was not saying much.

The marquis had ridden to the Catalan camp accompanied by a small escort of men-at-arms and a standard bearer carrying a huge banner showing his coat of arms. He left the pass without extending an invitation to Hector to dine with him and his wife, Maria of Verona, at his residence, the castle of Bodonitsa, some four miles southeast of Thermopylae. But Albert Pallavicini was still busy that night – compiling a letter to the Duke of Athens.

Your grace

The Catalan Company of mercenaries is now camped in the pass at Thermopylae prior to continuing its march south to Athens. Having had a chance to inspect its camp and having met with its commanders, I would like to give my personal opinion concerning the Catalan mercenaries.

Whereas their record on the battlefield in Sicily and more recently in the Roman Empire cannot be disputed, I worry that just as the Romans failed to control them, so you might encounter difficulties when it comes to getting them to obey orders. It is well known they created their own kingdom on the Gallipoli Peninsula. They were forced to quit that place on account of an exhaustion of their funds and the laying waste of the lands to the north of the peninsula. As they do not contain a single Christian knight or an individual of noble status, they have become accustomed to living like a large band of well-organised brigands. They have a complete disregard for social norms to the extent that low-born women are allowed to express their opinion in the presence of their social superiors. And it would appear all the menfolk are free to give their opinion to any who will listen to them.

I have acceded to your wishes and provided the mercenaries with food so they will not resort to plunder, but in all conscience I will be pleased when they have departed my lands. But when they do so they will enter your domain.

My fear is that the Catalan Company, being bereft of the Christian values we have established and maintained in Greece, such as piety, respect for the social order and adherence to the Catholic faith, will prove untrustworthy and duplicitous allies. I pray I will be proved wrong in the above but fear my concerns will come to fruition.

I remain your faithful ally, Albert Pallavicini, Marquis of Bodonitsa.

Intrigued by the story of the Immortals crossing over the mountain, Hector decided to recreate the trek of Persia's finest warriors. Two days after the Marquis of Bodonitsa had ridden back to his castle, Hector's division stood at the foot of Mount Kallidromos, a thousand men in ranks of four with long files, each one made up of two hundred and fifty men. The morning was sunny and warm, the drizzle and grey clouds having vanished to present the high mountain in all its glory. True to his word, the marquis had sent a shepherd to show Hector the way over the mountain via the so-called Anopaea trail. The shepherd was a miserable, stick-thin individual who looked as though he would fall apart at any moment. Worse, he spoke neither Catalan nor Italian, which meant Romanus, the former shepherd from Anatolia, would have to act as translator.

'Tell him we like to maintain a brisk pace,' Hector instructed Romanus.

The former shepherd stood to the right of Hector in the front rank of the division, while on the left of the commander was Luca and on the Black Sheep's left side stood Jordi. All four were equipped in full war gear of helmet, three javelins in a quiver protruding over the right shoulder for ease of plucking, small round shield slung over the left shoulder, spear, short sword and dagger.

The shepherd nodded when Romanus had translated Hector's words, placed a finger against his right nostril to close it and blew a large glob of phlegm out of the left one. He then said something to Romanus who turned to Hector.

'He says it is warm here but up on the mountain it will probably get windy and rainy, and do we want to get our cloaks?'

The shepherd was dressed in dirty linen clothes but wore a woollen hat and had a cloak around his shoulders, the combination of which was making him sweat. He also carried a gnarled crook in his skeleton-like right hand.

'Just tell him to concentrate on his own well-being,' replied Hector.

The shepherd grunted and shrugged his shoulders when the message was passed on, though his eyes lit up when he spotted Ayna. Luca could not help but smile at his beloved, who looked like the epitome of an Amazon warrior of old. Her black locks were tied behind her neck and her leggings and tunic clung to her shapely body. Like the men she was wearing a *zamarra* sheepskin coat, the distinctive garment of the Almogavars. She was not wearing a helmet and did not carry a sword or shield, but the spear she held in her right hand was identical to the one carried by Luca and there was a wicked dagger in a sheath attached to her belt.

Hector gave her a dispassionate look. 'Haven't changed your mind, then?'

When Luca had told her Hector was planning to march the Almogavars over the mountain to recreate the march of the Immortals many centuries before, she had begged the company commander to allow the Maidens of the Spear to join them. Hector had scoffed at the idea at first but then the malicious side of his nature saw an opportunity to take the wind out of the sails of the Muslim woman who had too much to say for herself. He respected her abilities with a spear; indeed, it was because she was a fighter that she had joined the company, albeit as a captive who had been purchased by Luca Baldi. And she had fought beside Carla Rey in the harbour at Kallipolis when the Genoese had attempted to seize the city. She was a fighter, no doubt about that, but she was also opinionated and had become something of a spokeswoman for the female members of the company. She had formed a unit of Muslim women called the Maidens of the Spear, recruited from the wives and daughters of the company's horse archers. It would fight alongside other females in the company who were able to carry a weapon in emergencies. But Ayna had dreams of fighting with the Almogavars on the battlefield, an idea which appalled Hector. There was no use in arguing with her because she stood her ground and refused to back down, just as she had when she had secured the release of the supposedly doomed Luca Baldi at Thessalonica. But now perhaps Mount Kallidromos might come to Hector's rescue.

‘The maidens are eager to show you their abilities,’ replied Ayna. ‘They and the two hundred other women with them.’

Hector rolled his eyes and pointed up at the mountain.

‘If you fall behind you are on your own. In war the weak fall first and the strong cannot afford to sacrifice themselves out of pity. You understand?’

‘You worry about yourself, Hector,’ she replied, flashing a smile at Luca before turning and walking back along Hector’s division to where two hundred and forty women waited for their inspirational leader.

‘Talk is cheap,’ muttered Hector, comforting himself with the thought a hard march under arduous conditions would shatter the growing myth of the Maidens of the Spear and their leader.

‘What do you think?’ Luca said to Jordi.

Jordi smiled. ‘I think Hector underestimates our women.’

Monica, his woman, was part of the female contingent, the buxom Chana having been asked by Ayna to remain with the children in camp. It was a considerate request as Chana would struggle on a route march over the mountain.

Hector could not resist one last dig, turning to Luca.

‘Immortals, Maidens of the Spear, they are a strange lot these Persians. Fancy names don’t mean anything on the battlefield, though. Or on a big mountain.’ He blew the whistle around his neck. ‘Let’s move.’

And the mountain was excessively big close up, immense slabs of grey rock rearing up on either side of the path the shepherd led the Almogavars to. Luca saw the track, which was narrow, steep, almost vertical, and worried about Ayna. She was tough and resilient. But still...

The first ten minutes were easy, a thousand Almogavars and a formation of women moving silently upwards, the shepherd guide displaying remarkable stamina as he led the way, not turning even once to see if he was being followed or was out-pacing the foreign soldiers. Either side of the track tall pines clung to the rocks, creating a deep ravine that made Luca feel like a tiny ant. As he continued upwards the way narrowed and the branches of the trees overlapped to form a solid green roof to block out the sun apart from a few tiny shards of light.

After an hour of marching, Almogavars with red cloths making brief stops to tie them to branches as markers, they came to a precipitous ravine, the guide darting left to follow the track upwards and away from the sheer drop. Luca suddenly admired the Immortals, who made the march at night, and wondered how many fell to their deaths at this point as they staggered through the dark. Despite being autumn the air was thick and humid and he was sweating, compounded by having to negotiate a track littered with pebbles and brown pine needles. The

guide led them along the winding track through a forest of silver firs, continuing on up at a steep angle that forced Luca and the others to take gulps of air. And in the back of his mind was a nagging fear that Ayna might have fallen behind or, worse, injured herself. He was used to marching over difficult terrain but she was not an Almogavar and might inadvertently twist an ankle or fall and break a bone. He caught brief glimpses of brisk streams running over shingle and waterfalls cascading over rock ledges but no stunning views of the Malian Gulf or inland hills. They were still in a never-ending forest, which was still and airless.

Hector allowed no halts as his division maintained the cruel pace, which Luca was surprised at. He thought it was going to be a leisurely stroll up and down a mountain, not a forced march. He was twenty-four years old and at the peak of his physical powers but even he was finding it difficult to maintain the pace while at the same time keep his footing on the slippery surface.

And then the pines suddenly ended and he was no longer going upwards, instead marching on level ground as the Almogavars entered a verdant plateau sprinkled with walnut, mulberry and other fruit trees. He took a few steps after leaving the firs and was buffeted by a strong wind that caught him unawares and nearly knocked him off his feet.

‘Stay focused,’ shouted Hector.

The guide had his head down and his cloak clutched tightly to his body as he leaned into the wind and paced on. The sun had disappeared, the grey clouds had returned and then the heavens emptied. A hard pelting rain assaulted the column, the raindrops becoming like tiny darts as they assaulted the Almogavars. Luca was drenched in sweat and hot but he soon became soaked and cold as the wind and rain combined to chill him to the bone. He had been marching for two hours but Hector told Romanus to instruct the guide to continue showing them the way; they would stop for a water break when they reached the cover of a forest. He knew the Almogavars’ reserves of strength and stamina would easily see them through the lashing they were enduring. But Luca worried about the women and by the look on Jordi’s face his friend was having similar thoughts. He glanced right to see an evil leer on Hector’s face.

They had been marching for three hours when he called a halt after entering a forest of pine. Luca uncorked his water bottle and took a few small gulps. No one guzzled down their water for to do so was to invite stomach cramps and retching when they re-commenced marching, which they did after five minutes. He looked towards the rear of the column but the track was winding and he could not see any women. He prayed they were safe.

‘You should remind your woman we are not here for amusement and war is not a game,’ Hector said to him before blowing his whistle to signal the column should move.

They were descending now and going down is easier on the lungs but harder on the knees as individuals tried to maintain their footing on the muddy, rocky path that followed the course of a fast-flowing stream. The pace became slower when they entered an expanse of oak, the trees autumn red and a stunning spectacle, though their fallen leaves made the ground very slippery and treacherous. The guide was very light on his feet, dodging fallen branches, muddy pools and slippery rocks with the skill of a mountain goat, which in a sense he was, albeit in human form.

It took another two hours to reach the valley. Two hours of concentrating on keeping one's footing and ensuring spears did not get caught on low branches. When Luca spotted the shimmering waters of the Malian Gulf below, he was tempted to quicken his pace, but he fought against the instinct, aware needless injuries could occur when the end was in sight and when concentration could slip. So he kept his discipline while descending the steep, scree-covered track as it left the pines, bushes of red berries among the limestone rocks replacing branches, leaves and tree trunks. It was now dry underfoot, though Luca's footwear was splattered with mud and his leggings soaked from the rain encountered on the plateau higher up. Five hours after commencing the route march, Hector and his division of tired and filthy Almogavars walked back to camp after replicating the night march of the Persian Immortals centuries before. After being dismissed Luca, Romanus and dozens of others raced back up the track to find their women.

Ayna and the others were half an hour behind the Almogavars, still marching in formation but slowed by the need to assist those who had twisted ankles or cracked a rib after falling. Luca smiled when he saw Ayna in the front rank, Monica beside her, gripping their spears and resting them on their right shoulders. They both looked tired and no wonder. They and those with them had conducted an arduous march across a mountain carrying weapons, which even for veteran soldiers was challenging. He had nothing but admiration for the Maidens of the Spear. He and the other Almogavars lined the side of the track applauding them as they passed by, then falling in behind to escort them on the final leg of the journey.

That night Ayna and Monica seized up, their legs trapped in invisible vices that tightened by the hour, despite being massaged by their menfolk. The price of over-exertion and refusing to give up.

The next day the divisions of Xavi and Ferran made the march over Mount Kallidromos, their route marked by the red cloths positioned the day before. On the third day Miquel's division carried out the march, though its members did not need the red markers as the route was clearly indicated by the ground trampled and churned up by the previous three divisions. Hector had ordered that all four divisions be timed to determine which one was the quickest, an

uneven contest as far as his division was concerned because it had been slowed by the guide leading it, who had vanished into thin air once Hector's division neared camp.

Xavi's division won the contest.

Hector was impressed by the Maidens of the Spear and ordered the hot springs at the base of the mountain to be cordoned off to allow the women who had followed his division to bathe in their healing waters. Supposedly created by the ancient Greek god Hephaestus on the request of the goddess Athena, the hot, healing waters allowed the Greek hero Heracles to regain his strength after carrying out herculean tasks. It certainly healed Ayna, Monica and the others, who emerged from the steaming pools reinvigorated and ready to conduct another march, this time to Athens. The Marquis of Bodonitsa was both glad and relieved to see the back of the Catalan Company, which departed Thermopylae leaving a host of red markers on Mount Kallidromos.