

CLASH  
OF  
EMPIRES

BEN KANE



ORION

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For Sam Wood and Dylan Reynolds  
– cyclists, gentlemen and since the Hannibal Trail in 2016,  
good friends.

*'It would be best if the Greeks never made war on each other, but could ever speak with one heart and voice, repel barbarian invaders together and unite in preserving themselves and their cities. If such a union is unattainable, I would counsel you to take due precautions for your safety, in view of the greatness of this war in the west. It is evident that whether the Romans or Carthaginians win this war, the victors will not be content with the sovereignty of Italy and Sicily. They are sure to come here and extend their ambitions beyond the bounds of justice. Therefore I implore you all to secure yourselves against this danger, and I address myself especially to King Philip.'*

Agelaus of Aetolia, conference of Naupactus, 217 BC

## A SHORT NOTE ABOUT GREEK CITY STATES

Ancient Greece contained a confusing plethora of similar-sounding city states and regions. Most readers will have known of Athens, Sparta and Macedon, but not necessarily of Aetolia, Achaea, Athamania and Acarnania. Thermopylae and Marathon will be familiar, but it's less likely for modern readers to know the towns of the Hellespont and the mountain towns between Macedon and Illyria. It took me some time to familiarise myself with these political and geographical entities, and so to increase your enjoyment of the book, I urge you first to spend a little time looking over the maps.

Ben Kane

[single page map – to follow mid-March]

[single page map – to follow mid-March]

## PROLOGUE

*Off the southern coast of Italia,  
early summer, 215 BC*

It was a beautiful summer's evening, balmy and windless; the sea resembled a sheet of hammered bronze. A dozen small fishing boats were homeward bound, shadowed by screeching gulls. Light winked off soldiers' helmets on the coastal road. In the western sky, the mountains of Bruttium were dark shadows against the slow-sinking, golden orb of the sun. North-eastward, somewhere in the heat haze, lay the great city of Tarentum. Further out on the water, a squadron of Roman triremes beat a passage across the great, square-edged bay that cut deep into Italia's southern shores.

The ships were in two lines of five, and the front central vessel was commanded by the admiral Publius Valerius Flaccus. He was in no hurry – the three-day patrol, as far as the town of Locri and back again, had been uneventful – and they would reach their home port of Tarentum by sunset. Flaccus had decided that writing his report and other such duties could wait until the morrow. After a bath and a change of clothes, he was looking forward to an evening in the company of his mistress, the widow of a nobleman who had fallen at Cannae.

Flaccus was a short, determined individual. A fleshy jowl and receding hair took nothing away from his commanding presence, which was accentuated by a pair of bright blue eyes. It was these last, he was sure, together with his high rank and city graces, that had seen the widow succumb to his advances. Tarentum was no backwater, but those from Rome had a more cultured air; Flaccus knew how to milk that invisible superiority to the last drop. It had worked on his mistress-to-be the first time they'd met, at a recent feast to honour his arrival in the city. His lips twitched. He had bedded her the same night.

Just the right type of plump, she had soft, perfumed skin and remarkably pert breasts. Her bedroom tastes, wide-ranging and insatiable,

were an endless source of surprise and pleasure. Flaccus reined in his imagination; like his officers, he sported a short tunic at sea rather than the cumbersome toga of his rank.

From his position close to the steersman, he had a view along the length of the ship. A central walkway connected the bow to the stern. To either side, three banks of oarsmen sat on benches, their bodies and outstretched arms moving back and forth in perpetual rhythm. At the front a flautist played, his melody setting the beat. The oar masters, standing every twenty-five paces along the walkway, rapped their metal-shod staffs on the planking in time to the tune. Currently the slow cruise, it commanded a steady speed that the rowers could keep up for hours.

It excited Flaccus to think that with a single word, he could have the entire squadron move to ramming speed. He had done so before, during training exercises, and by the gods, it stirred the blood. It would feel different when closing with an enemy fleet of course; thrilling and terrifying at the same time. Quite how frightening, Flaccus had no idea, but imagining a ram's ridged bronze snout punching through *his* ship's hull was enough to make his belly tighten. Sinking to a watery grave was not how he wanted to end his life – nor was being sucked under by a passing vessel, or being speared in the sea by the foe. Sending a Carthaginian ship to the bottom, now that was an appealing thought. So too was running down the side of an enemy trireme, shearing away oars, and turning the vessel into a useless hulk to be boarded at one's leisure.

'Sail!'

The lookout's unexpected cry focused everyone's attention, not least Flaccus'. Fishing boats, plentiful and unthreatening, didn't warrant a shout. Trading vessels did, but with nightfall approaching, most round-bellied merchantmen would already be moored in a harbour, or anchored close to shore.

'Another sail!' cried the lookout. 'Three, four – I see five, dead ahead!'

Flaccus hurried to the prow, the captain on his heels. An oar master goggled at him, and Flaccus snapped, 'Maintain the rhythm until told otherwise, fool!'

He shoved past, the yells of the lookouts on his other ships increasing his unease.

It seemed doubtful the intruders were Carthaginian. Since Rome's huge naval victories during the last war, thought Flaccus, the *guggas*

avoided encounters with Roman fleets wherever possible. Another alternative, Macedonian warships, seemed as unlikely. King Philip had attacked the island of Cephallenia two years before, it was true, and there were rumours of his designs on Illyria, but he wouldn't have the gall to send ships into Italian waters. Flaccus put the notion from his mind.

He reached the lookout, a skinny lad with wind-tousled hair.

'Where?'

The lookout gave him a nervous salute, and pointed a few degrees to starboard.

'There, sir. About two miles away.'

Flaccus raised a hand to his eyes. Far in the distance, outlined against the dark sea, were three white squares – sails. His heart thumped. He waited, spying after a moment two more. The ships were heading south-east towards the headland that formed Italia's heel, and any hope of a successful pursuit once they rounded that would be lost, Flaccus judged.

'Shall we give chase, sir?' The captain, a bow-legged old salt whom Flaccus had grown to like, was by his side.

'Aye. They're not Roman, that's certain. It would be best to find out what they are doing in these waters.'

'With the sun behind us, sir, they won't know we're coming until we are good and close.' The captain's leer revealed half a dozen peg-like brown stumps. 'Gives us a decent chance, that does.'

Flaccus nodded. 'Good.'

The captain waved at the flautist. 'Fast cruise!'

A quicker melody started, and at once the oar masters took up the new rhythm. The rowers bent their backs and heaved, and within ten heartbeats, the trireme's speed had doubled. The ram scythed into the waves, as if it could sense their new prey.

The chase was on.

It was a close-run affair in the end. Flaccus' ships had closed to within perhaps three-quarters of a mile before their quarry realised a thing. Quite what gave them away at that point was unclear – the sun was so low that anyone staring west would have been almost blinded – but suddenly, the five ships' speed increased to match that of the Roman triremes.

The headland was close, and the open sea beyond beckoned. Flaccus threw the dice, and gambled all.

‘Ramming speed!’ he bellowed.

It was a Herculean task to expect his oarsmen to sustain a chase with that distance remaining, but there was nothing to lose. At worst, the ships would escape, Flaccus decided, and his crews would face a long pull back to Tarentum under the stars. At best, their quarry would be brought to bay, and he’d discover why they had run like startled deer.

In the event, the breakneck-speed chase was short. Two of the vessels they were pursuing broke away, but the crews aboard the rest were no match for Flaccus’ oarsmen. Seeing their fellows’ plight, the front pair of ships came to a stop in the water. Cumbersome craft though they were, and outnumbered by his triremes, Flaccus took no chances. He sent four ships to surround the front two, and with the five remaining and his own vessel, crowded in around the slowest.

Shouted commands saw the three merchantmen’s oars shipped. No one armed could be seen on their decks, and Flaccus’ initial unease was replaced by a calm smugness. His plan had been well executed; resistance appeared unlikely. He had time to discover the ships’ purpose, treat them accordingly, whether that be to fine their captains or impound their vessels, and still reach Tarentum before moonrise. His evening with his mistress was not under threat, an immense satisfaction.

Anticipation rising, Flaccus watched as the oarsmen eased his ship alongside the largest merchantman, a round-bellied craft with a square canvas sail. The port side oars rattled and dripped as they were drawn in. The ships slid past one another, scraping timbers; grappling hooks thumped onto the deck and were made fast. The sailors on the captured vessel shuffled about, faces tight with fear. Close to the mast, a small group of richly dressed men shared nervous mutters.

‘Send over a boarding party,’ Flaccus ordered. ‘Find out who’s in charge, and bring him to me.’

The gangplank dropped with a bang, and a score of marines clattered across, led by an *optio*.

Four soon returned, leading a stout figure.

‘Says he’s the commander, sir,’ declared the *optio*.

A none too friendly shove propelled the captive closer to Flaccus. Middle-aged, with a neat beard, he had intelligent eyes. An embroidered

himation, gold finger rings and his confident carriage marked him as a man of means. He bowed to Flaccus.

‘Xenophanes of Athens, at your service, sir.’ His Latin was accented, but good. ‘Might I know your name?’

‘Publius Valerius Flaccus, admiral.’ He studied Xenophanes’ face for signs of guile, but could see none. This meant nothing. In times of war, thought Flaccus, a man could trust no one save those who had proved themselves worthy of it. The Athenian hadn’t made a good start. ‘You fled from my ships. Why?’

Xenophanes’ fingers fluttered. ‘My apologies, admiral. We took you for pirates. Coming from the west, with the sun at your backs – it seemed sure that we were being attacked. There are a few weapons on each ship, but these are no warships. Flight was my only option.’ A nervous smile. ‘Not that we got far. Your oarsmen are to be commended.’

Flaccus ignored the compliment. ‘What is your business in these waters?’

Xenophanes’ expression grew confidential. He leaned closer, but the distrustful optio seized him by the shoulder. Xenophanes raised his hands.

‘I mean the admiral no harm.’

‘Keep your distance then, barbarian,’ growled the optio.

Anger flitted across Xenophanes’ face, but he gave Flaccus a practised smile.

‘I wish to speak in confidence, without other ears listening.’

‘Say what you have to say,’ said Flaccus, already tired of whatever game Xenophanes was trying to play. In Tarentum, his mistress was waiting.

With a dark glance at the optio, Xenophanes muttered, ‘I am an emissary of Philip of Macedon.’ Seeing Flaccus’ astonishment, he added quickly, ‘As a neutral, the king deemed it easier for me to seek a meeting with your consuls and Senate; my purpose was to seal a pact of friendship with Rome and its people.’

This Flaccus had *not* expected. ‘These are strange tidings. Philip has borne the Republic ill will of recent years.’

‘A misunderstanding, nothing more.’ Xenophanes’ tone was bluff.

It was hard to see how invading Cephallenia was to be misunderstood, thought Flaccus.

‘I am unaware of any Macedonian embassy journeying to Rome.’

‘You have heard nothing of my task, admiral, because we failed to reach Rome. Landing at Juno’s temple near Croton, we travelled overland towards Capua. Encountering Roman forces, we met with the *praetor* Laevinus. He was a generous host, and provided an escort to guide us on the safest routes, protection from Hannibal’s army.’

Flaccus hid his surprise. Laevinus *was* a praetor operating in Campania. It seemed doubtful that Xenophanes could know of him unless he had met with the man, but that didn’t explain why he, Flaccus, remained unaware of the Macedonian embassy and its unexpected mission. News of a possible alliance with Philip – welcome after the disaster at Cannae the previous year – would travel fast, thought Flaccus. And yet, Xenophanes’ story wasn’t beyond the realms of possibility.

‘You were attacked by the Carthaginians, I assume. Is that why your journey to Rome failed?’

Xenophanes looked strained. ‘Aye. Numidian cavalry are as deadly as they say. Several of our escort were killed, and their commander deemed it too unsafe to continue. On our return to Laevinus’ camp, I pleaded for further aid to no avail. All his troops were needed to fight the enemy, he said. Without military protection, there was no chance of reaching Rome; I was forced to abandon our mission. You find us on our way back to Macedon.’

‘Have you proof of Philip’s intentions?’

‘Of course. The documents are in a chest in my cabin. Say the word, and I will have them brought across.’

Flaccus rubbed his chin. Previous hostility between Rome and Macedonia wouldn’t prevent Philip from seeking an alliance. Keenly aware that the fast-approaching onset of night would delay his return to Tarentum – and the willing arms of his mistress – by a considerable amount, Flaccus came to a decision. If Xenophanes’ papers seemed genuine and a search of his craft brought nothing else to light, he would have little reason to detain the Athenian further.

‘Let me have a look.’

Pleased, Xenophanes nodded. Cupping a hand to his mouth, he shouted an order at the nearest of his sailors.

Flaccus’ good humour was returning.

‘Wine?’ he asked.

‘I would be honoured, admiral.’ Xenophanes’ bow was a good deal deeper than before.

They had toasted each other and drunk by the time the documents came aboard. Flaccus cast a critical eye at the two parchments, one of which was in Carthaginian and the other in Greek. The wording of the former seemed to bear out Xenophanes’ testimony; he assumed the latter to read the same. Stamped with a Macedonian seal, with a bold signature from Philip himself, both appeared authentic. His decision confirmed, Flaccus signalled for more wine. Smiling, Xenophanes accepted a refill.

‘Let us hope that your next attempt to reach Rome succeeds,’ said Flaccus, saluting Xenophanes with his cup. ‘Here’s to long-lasting friendship between the Republic and Macedonia.’

‘May the gods grant it so,’ replied Xenophanes, returning the gesture. Cup drained, Flaccus glanced at the optio.

‘Escort this gentleman back to his ship. Check the boarding party have found nothing important, and have them return.’

‘My thanks for your hospitality,’ said Xenophanes.

‘Neptunus watch over your ships,’ Flaccus replied.

‘May Poseidon do the same to you.’

‘Captain, make ready to shove off,’ ordered Flaccus.

Xenophanes had just set foot on the gangplank when a commotion broke out on his ship. Raised voices came from below decks. Two marines clambered into sight.

‘We’ve found something, sir!’ they shouted at the optio.

‘More like *someone*,’ added the tallest.

Flaccus was by the rail in a heartbeat.

‘What is it?’

‘We discovered three men in the bottom of the hold, sir,’ said the lead marine. ‘Right behind a load of stacked amphorae, they was. If one hadn’t sneezed, we never would have found them.’

Flaccus’ eyes shot to Xenophanes. The Greek was halfway across the gangplank, and his pace had noticeably quickened.

‘Halt, Xenophanes!’ bellowed Flaccus. ‘Get him back over here, optio.’ To the marines, he said, ‘Bring them up. Quickly!’

Soon a trio of swarthy men stood blinking on the deck opposite Flaccus. With a look of grim satisfaction, the optio pushed Xenophanes to stand alongside. The Athenian ignored the newcomers, and Flaccus’

suspicious returned with a vengeance. With their dark complexions, oiled ringlets, and long tunics, they resembled the Carthaginians he'd encountered.

'Well, Xenophanes?'

They stared at one another in silence.

'They're paying passengers,' Xenophanes admitted. Spots of colour marked his cheekbones. 'I knew it wouldn't look good to have their type on board if we were stopped by Roman ships.'

'What type would that be?' asked Flaccus, sneering.

Silence.

'Well?'

'Carthaginians.'

As Xenophanes spoke, understanding blossomed in Flaccus' mind.

'Search the guggas.'

Inside twenty heartbeats, a separate set of documents was in his hands, discovered under the tunic of the most senior Carthaginian, a proud-faced man with a hawkish look. The emissary soon lost his composure under a rain of blows from the optio and his men; Xenophanes yelped like a whipped child as he too was beaten. Flaccus, whose nod had initiated the assaults, paid no attention. The tip of his tongue stuck from between his lips as he laboriously read the Carthaginian. More shocked than he'd have thought possible, he reread the letter three times before trying to comprehend its full significance.

Flaccus caught the captain's eye. 'Change course. We sail for Rome.'

The old salt looked startled. 'Rome, sir?'

'You heard me. Send a message to the other ships. Three will accompany us. The others are to return to Tarentum.'

'Aye, sir.' The captain shouted to the oar masters, who rapped out a set of orders. At once, the rowers on one side of the ship heaved their oars out of the water, while those on the other dug deep, turning the ship around to face the west.

Flaccus watched impatiently. He wanted to order ramming speed, but there was no point exhausting the oarsmen. Despite his urgency, the capital was at least two days' voyage away.

'We're sailing for Rome, sir?' The optio had moved to his side.

'Aye.'

'Can I ask why, sir?'

The optio could speak to no one else of importance on the ship,

Flaccus decided, and the news would spread the length and breadth of Italia before the month was out. 'You are to speak of this to no one.'

'On my life, sir,' said the optio

'Philip seeks an alliance with Hannibal.'

The optio looked confused.

'Here's the proof!' Flaccus brandished the letter.

In the light of the setting sun, the writing on the parchment took on a blood red hue.

A worse omen Flaccus could not imagine.



PART ONE





## CHAPTER I

*Thirteen years later . . .*

*Near the town of Chalkedon, on the shores of  
the Propontis, late summer 202 BC*

Demetrios didn't like hiding in the trees, but near the tents, it was easy to be spotted. Pilfering was a dangerous occupation. He'd been caught and badly beaten a couple of times; now he spied out the ground before risking his skin. Here on the fringes of King Philip's camp, among the evergreen bushes and cork oaks, he could pick the right moment. The only people about were soldiers seeking a quiet place to empty their bowels, and men with that on their minds paid little heed to a loitering youth in a ragged *chiton*. They'd take him for one of the hundreds of opportunistic tag-alongs following the Macedonian fleet along the Propontis.

Demetrios was no scavenger, but an oarsman on one of Philip's ships. Not on a glorious trireme, with its shining ram and patterned sail, or on one of the nimble *lembi*. His floating home was a pot-bellied, low-in-the-water transport vessel. It wasn't his choice of career, gods no. Since he was a boy, Demetrios had wanted to be a soldier who fought in the mighty phalanx. Now the chance of that seemed harder to reach than the summit of Olympos in mid-winter. It *might* have happened, thought Demetrios, if Ares hadn't turned his face away, if the other gods hadn't conspired against him.

His shepherd father had been poor, but he'd proudly served as a slinger in his younger days. He had taught Demetrios how to hunt, and sent him to learn pankration and wrestling with the wealthier farmers' sons. Lean, and wiry, strong from hard labour on the farm, he had learned fast, which was as well, for the richer boys had made fun of him at every opportunity. Stubborn, he had persevered, always thinking of his father's words: with the right introductions when he was older, becoming a *phalangist* could be arranged.

If only Father wasn't gone, thought Demetrios, his grief cutting him like knives. But he was, murdered by sheep rustlers on a filthy autumn night two years back. Orphaned – Demetrios' mother had died when he was five – and beggared by the theft of the entire flock, he had been reduced from shepherd's son to landless peasant at one stroke. With winter coming, even the kindest neighbours were able to feed him no more than for a few days. Soon he'd been forced to Pella, Macedon's capital and the nearest town of any size. Friendless, alone, his life on the streets had not been pleasant; he had survived by labouring in the market and on the docks.

In the spring just gone, when news spread that the king was to carry war to the Propontis, a sudden need had sprung up for crewmen on merchant vessels; Philip's soldiers would need vast quantities of food on their campaign, and ships to carry it. Sick of living hand-to-mouth, eager to be near the army, Demetrios had signed on with the first captain who would take him – which was how he found himself on the outskirts of the Macedonian camp, thousands of stadia from home.

His dream of becoming a phalangist hadn't quite vanished, but his day to day struggles ensured that he scarcely gave it a thought. The physical demands of rowing were immense; the oar masters were overfond of using fists and feet. The rowers toiled from dawn to dusk under the burning hot sun. Water was passed around regularly, but rest periods were rare. After wolfing down his meal each night, Demetrios often had the energy only to lie down with his blanket. Sleep was hard to come by, thanks to those of his fellows who prowled the decks in search of flesh. After a near escape soon after joining the ship, he had formed an unofficial alliance with a couple of the younger rowers. They weren't friends as such – Demetrios knew this because they'd both stolen food from him – but come nightfall, the three stayed close, and took turns to stay awake. The arrangement meant he got a little more rest than before, but his sleep was fitful, and he always kept a dagger clutched in his fist.

Advancement from the benches seemed improbable; his hope of becoming a shepherd again was more realistic, but it would take a year at least to save the coin for a few sheep. Demetrios concentrated, therefore, on getting through each day, and trying to fill his belly as often as possible. Eighteen, still growing, he was always hungry. Aboard their ship at least, oarsmen's rations were poor quality and served in miserly

portions. Stealing provisions was a daily, necessary task. Mornings were no good – Demetrios had had to grow used to his growling stomach at these times – but at the end of the day, as the sun set, when soldiers and sailors were tired, the pickings were better. He had learned to choose the tents where most men were absent, leaving the soldier whose turn it was to cook.

One such lay not fifty paces away, the closest to his position in the trees. An iron tripod stood over a small fire; dangling from its chain was a pot. Saliva filled Demetrios' mouth at the thought of the bubbling stew within. Despite its appeal, the risks were too great. Running with a vessel full of boiling liquid – a nigh-on impossible task – would end badly. Less tasty, but easy to steal, were the flat breads that the lone soldier had prepared and set to cook on the stones around his fire. Two or three would sate Demetrios' hunger. He might also trade one with a crewmate for a morsel of meat, or some olives.

His hopes that the soldier would be distracted by a neighbour had thus far come to naught, and so when the man gave his stew a good stir and then aimed for the trees with a determined gait, Demetrios grinned.

Gods, let him need a shit rather than a piss, he prayed.

He waited until the man, a tough-looking *peltast*, had drawn near before leaving the treeline, at the same time making a show of adjusting his chiton in the manner of someone who has just visited the latrine. Avoiding eye contact, Demetrios angled his walk away from the fire with its all-important bread. Close to the tents, a surreptitious glance told him the peltast had vanished into the woods.

Demetrios changed direction. Twenty steps, and he was standing by the tripod. The rich aroma of pork and herbs filled his mouth with saliva. Snatching up the cook's ladle, he scooped up a great mouthful. It was better tasting food than he'd had in days. His belly screamed for more, but time wasn't on his side. Demetrios grabbed three flat breads, and then, unable to stop himself, a hunk of cheese as well. Dropped into his loose-necked chiton, they were held in place by his belt. He looked to the trees, and was relieved to see no sign of the peltast. When his theft *was* noticed, thought Demetrios, he would be long gone.

Whistling his father's favourite tune, he sauntered off between the tents. Tonight, he would sleep on a full stomach.

\*

There was no pursuit from his well-executed crime. Success made Demetrios cocky. Rather than eating in the relative safety of his ship, he made the mistake of stopping a *stadion* from the peltast's fire. One flat bread wolfed down and still ravenous, he opted next for a bite of cheese.

A voice drawled, 'What do we have here?'

Pulling food from his clothing did not look good; Demetrios decided to brazen it out. He shrugged at the group of young slingers who'd appeared from between the tents to his left and said, 'Robbing from your mates isn't a crime. They steal from us, we steal from them – you know how it is. Tomorrow the bastards will be prowling around, looking to repay the favour.'

The youth who'd spoken, a broad-chested individual with black hair held in place by a leather thong, let out an unpleasant laugh.

'Except you don't have any mates round here, sewer rat. We camp in the same spot every night; a man gets to recognise his neighbours. I've not seen you around before, which means you're a thief, plain and simple.' His friends rumbled in agreement.

Demetrios bridled. 'What's it to you?'

'Hear him! That's as good as a confession if I ever heard one,' said the slinger with a sneer.

Demetrios wasn't sure why the slinger cared what he'd stolen if it wasn't from his own fire, but one thing was certain: a beating was imminent. His accuser had four companions, not all large, but every one capable-looking. They fanned out and walked towards Demetrios with purposeful glares.

Slingers were fleet of foot, he thought, and these seemed no different. Even if he outpaced them to his ship, there was scant chance of help from his fellow oarsmen. In the pecking order of the rowing benches, Demetrios was near the bottom. He tried another option.

'D'you want some cheese? I have bread as well.'

Jeers and laughter followed.

'We'll take it after we've kicked the shit out of you,' said the leader.

Demetrios' thought had been not to resist, but the leader's arrogance was unbearable.

'Screw you, and your mother!' he cried, and lunged at the leftmost slinger.

With four paces separating them, his target had time only to gape

before Demetrios' right shoulder drove into his belly. Winded, he dropped like a stone down a well. Demetrios spun, and smashed a left hook into the next man's jaw. Pain lanced from his hand, but the slinger's knees buckled. Demetrios fled, his ears ringing with outraged cries of 'Thief!'

He darted and weaved through the tents, leaping over guy ropes and at one point, a fire. Maintaining his lead, he began to entertain hopes of reaching the relative sanctuary of the anchored ships. The slingers wouldn't dare follow him out to those – although the fleet was part of Philip's host, there was a good deal of animosity between soldiers and crewmen.

Demetrios never saw the foot that tripped him. One moment, he was aiming for the gap between two tents, the next, the ground was hurtling towards his face. His outstretched hands took some of the impact, but the air still left his lungs with a whoosh. He rolled, desperate to get up, but the foot's owner gave him a mighty kick in the gut that sent him earthward again. Demetrios retched and a heartbeat later, spewed up the bread he'd swallowed. As he tried to push himself up on his elbows, a blow to the ribs knocked him back down. He sucked in a ragged breath, and wondered what in Tartaros he could do now.

Feet pounded. Voices drew near.

'Is this who you're chasing?' someone asked.

'Looks like it,' said the slinger who'd challenged Demetrios.

'He a thief?'

'Aye. Our thanks, comrade.'

The slinger's sandal-clad pair of feet halted in front of Demetrios' face. One kicked him, hard.

'Up, whoreson.'

Demetrios was at the slingers' mercy, but he wasn't ready to give in. Lunging forward, he sank his teeth into the slinger's ankle. A cry of pain and his victim stumbled backwards. Somehow he got to his knees. A shocked-looking peltast – it was he who must have tripped him, thought Demetrios – saved the slinger from falling. Behind the two, he could see angry faces – the other slingers. He punched the peltast in the balls, and as the man bent double, groaning, stood up.

The rest might kill him, but Demetrios didn't care. All his grief and fury at his father's death, at the harsh existence life had dealt him since,

came boiling to the surface. If things had worked out as planned, he'd have been a phalangist by now, with no need to steal food. Instead, a lowly oarsman, he would die at the hands of the murderous slingers.

Demetrios set his back to the tent, his only defence, and clenched his fists.

'How many of you does it take to beat one man?'

The insult was too much. The slingers and peltast swarmed forward. Demetrios landed a couple of punches and a headbutt before a hail of blows sent him crashing to the ground. Stars burst across his vision; waves of pain battered every portion of his body. He did his best to curl into a ball. Protect his head, and there might be a chance of survival.

He lost consciousness soon after the stamping began.

Water splashed into Demetrios' face, and he came to, spluttering. He was lying on his side. There wasn't a part of him that didn't hurt. Clots of blood filled his mouth; rooting with his tongue, he found a loose tooth, and with difficulty, spat it out.

'He's alive.' The voice was amused. 'It's a wonder, considering how many of you jumped him.'

Feet shuffled. Demetrios didn't understand why no one answered. Cold fear uncoiled in his belly. An officer had come on the scene. When he heard the reasons for the attack, Demetrios' fate would be sealed anew. Resignation swamped him. The Fates were in a foul mood today.

'Can you move?' asked the voice.

Demetrios tried, and found he could. Wiping crimson-tinged drool from his bruised lips, he struggled into a sitting position. Sweet agony emanating from the right side of his chest signified cracked ribs; this was but the worst of his discomfort. He glanced up at the plain-cloaked man who'd spoken. Slim, bright-eyed, and with a neat beard, he reminded Demetrios of someone.

His eyes took in the slingers' and peltast's nervous expressions, and beyond them, an awed-looking crowd of soldiers. Realisation sank home. He'd heard the rumours of Philip wandering through the camp in plain attire, talking to his troops; it seemed the tales were true. Demetrios' stomach rolled. Whatever punishment he might have received would be worse now – the king would want to set an example.

He rose, wincing, to one knee.

‘Sire.’

‘These men say they caught you thieving bread.’ Philip jerked a thumb at the slingers.

Demetrios hesitated. Denying the accusation would look as if he were lying to save his skin. He glanced at his pursuers, who were openly gloating, and fury took him.

‘That’s not how it happened, sire.’

The lead slinger let out a contemptuous laugh.

‘So you didn’t steal anything?’ Philip’s tone was hard. Dangerous.

‘I did, sire.’ Demetrios pulled out a misshapen lump of bread – in the fight, his ill-gotten haul had been macerated. ‘But they didn’t see me take it. No one did.’

Something that might have been amusement flitted across Philip’s face.

‘How then did they come to attack you?’

‘I was starving, sire, so I stopped to eat some of it. The slingers saw, and not recognising me, presumed I had stolen the food.’

‘The slingers’ tents are a decent distance from here,’ said Philip. ‘After you ran, they gave chase?’

‘Not before I’d knocked two down, sire.’

‘How many were they?’

‘Five, sire.’

Philip’s eyebrows rose. ‘Five. Against you.’

‘Yes, sire.’

‘Are you a soldier?’

‘An oarsman, sire.’

‘On one of my warships?’

‘No, sire. A merchant vessel.’

The lead slinger flushed with shame. His companions looked embarrassed and furious. Philip, on the other hand, seemed intrigued.

‘How did they catch you?’ he demanded.

‘That peltast—’ Demetrios pointed ‘—heard their cries, sire, and tripped me.’

‘Men don’t like a thief,’ said Philip. ‘That’s when they beat you senseless.’

‘Aye, sire!’ cried the lead slinger.

‘I gave you something to remember me by,’ retorted Demetrios.

‘Your ankle will hurt for days. And I gave the peltast a good thump in the balls.’

Someone began to chuckle; it took a moment for Demetrios to realise that it was the king. Sure that it presaged a dreadful death, he hung his head.

‘My slingers are among the best in the world, or so they boast. Am I not right?’ demanded Philip.

The lead slinger found his voice. ‘Yes, sire.’

‘Yet five of you were reduced to three by an oarsman. *An oarsman*. You only caught the mongrel because someone else intervened. Even then, he managed to injure two more of your number before you got the better of him.’

Silence.

‘Speak, fool!’ Philip’s tone was murderous.

‘You have the right of it, sire,’ muttered the lead slinger.

‘Get out of my sight,’ snapped Philip.

Demetrios watched, disbelieving, as the slingers slunk away. If they’d been dogs, he thought, their tails would have been tucked right up between their hind legs. His delight was brief – the king would be punishing him too. Theft was theft; Demetrios had once seen a man executed for the crime. At the least, he could expect to have his right hand amputated. Panic swelled in his chest. Maimed, he couldn’t row. When the fleet moved on, he’d be left behind, to die of starvation.

‘You.’ Philip was talking to the peltast.

‘Sire.’ The man’s gaze was fixed on the ground.

‘You did what you thought was right – I cannot fault you for that. Being taken off guard by the boy, however . . .’ Philip paused, and the peltast looked up, naked terror in his face. The king laughed. ‘Consider the pain in your groin punishment enough. You may go.’

Gabbling his thanks, the peltast disappeared into his tent.

Demetrios closed his eyes. Now it comes, he thought. Let my end be quick, great Zeus.

‘On your feet.’

‘Sire.’

Philip was going to execute him standing, thought Demetrios. Gritting his teeth against the pain, he got up.

‘You’re proud. You fight like a soldier.’

Confusion took Demetrios. ‘I— sire.’

‘You stole because you were hungry?’

‘Aye, sire. They never give us enough.’

Philip’s expression blackened.

‘Merchant captains are paid sufficient funds to feed every man in their crew twice a day. What’s your ship’s name?’

‘*Star of the Sea*, sire.’

Philip gave him a nod. ‘On your way.’

Demetrios gaped. ‘Sire?’

‘You are free.’

‘You’re not going to kill me, sire?’

Philip’s lips peeled back in amusement.

‘I’m not.’

Demetrios gave Philip the deepest bow he could manage. Unable to believe his good fortune, he shuffled back the required ten paces before turning around and limping for the shoreline.

Halfway back to the ships, a quiet giggle escaped him. He still had the bread and cheese inside his chiton.