

You loved your last book...but what
are you going to read next?

Using our unique guidance tools, Love**reading** will help you find new
books to keep you inspired and entertained.

Opening Extract from...

Tyrant

King of the Bosphorus

Written by Christian Cameron

Published by Orion

All text is copyright © of the author

This Opening Extract is exclusive to Love**reading**.
Please print off and read at your leisure.

TYRANT

KING OF THE
BOSPORUS

CHRISTIAN CAMERON



An Orion paperback

First published in Great Britain in 2011
by Orion

This paperback edition published in 2011
by Orion Books Ltd,
Orion House, 5 Upper St Martin's Lane
London WC2H 9EA

An Hachette UK company

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

Copyright © Christian Cameron 2011

The right of Christian Cameron to be identified as the author
of this work has been asserted by him in accordance with
the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988.

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be
reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted
in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical,
photocopying, recording or otherwise, without the
prior permission of the copyright owner.

All the characters in this book are fictitious,
and any resemblance to actual persons living
or dead is purely coincidental.

A CIP catalogue record for this book
is available from the British Library.

ISBN 978-1-4091-0275-5

Typeset by Deltatype Ltd, Birkenhead, Merseyside

Printed and bound in Great Britain by
CPI Mackays, Chatham, Kent

The Orion Publishing Group's policy is to use papers that
are natural, renewable and recyclable products and made
from wood grown in sustainable forests. The logging and
manufacturing processes are expected to conform to the
environmental regulations of the country of origin.

www.orionbooks.co.uk

NORTH EUXINE SEA, AUTUMN, 311 BC

Satyrus leaned against the rail of the *Black Falcon* and watched his uncle, Leon the Numidian, arguing with his helmsman, just a boat's length away. Satyrus waited, looking for a signal, a wave, an invitation – anything to suggest that his uncle had a plan.

Next to him, on his own deck, Abraham Ben Zion shook his head. 'Where did a pissant tyrant like Eumeles get so many ships?'

Satyrus didn't turn his head. He was still waiting for the signal. 'I don't know,' he said. His dreams of being king of the Bosphorus this autumn were fading rapidly, rowed into froth by the sixty or seventy triremes that Eumeles of Pantecapaeum, his mother's murderer, had somehow mustered.

Leon had stopped talking to his helmsman. He came to his rail and put his hands to his mouth. 'Lay alongside me!' he called.

Satyrus turned and nodded to his own helmsman, Diokles, a burly man whose curling dark hair showed more Phoenician than Greek. 'Alongside the *Lotus*,' Satyrus said.

Diokles nodded. 'Alongside it is, sir.'

Satyrus owned only one ship, and that by the laws of war. The year before, he had taken the *Black Falcon* in a sea fight off the coast of the Levant in a rising storm. *Falcon* was lighter and smaller and far less robust than Leon's *Golden Lotus* or the other four *triemioliai* of Leon's squadron – all his own ships, for Leon the Numidian was one of the richest men in Alexandria, one of the richest cities on the curve of the world.

Falcon was a small, old-style trireme, built light and fast the Athenian way. He had good points and bad points, but Satyrus loved him fiercely – all the more as he suspected he was about to lose the ship.

Falcon turned to port and 'folded his wings', all the oars coming inboard together to the call of Neiron, the oar master amidships, so that he slowed into a long curve. Diokles' broad face was a study in concentration, a hard frown creasing the corners of his mouth as he leaned on his oars.

Lotus closed on the reciprocal course. The two ships had been side by side, each leading a column of ten warships eastward along the north coast of the Euxine. They didn't have far to close, and the rowers on both ships pulled their oars in well before their blades might foul, and the helmsmen steered small, guiding the hulls together as they coasted along.

Leon stepped up on the rail, holding one of the white-linen shrouds that held the mast. He leaned out, and just before the sides of the ships touched, he leaped – easily crossing the distance between ships, his left foot on the *Falcon's* rail, his right foot stepping down on to the deck of Satyrus's ship just forward of where the bulwark rose in the sharp curve of the stem.

'We'll have to fight through them,' Leon said, as soon as he was aboard. He nodded to the statue of Poseidon on the mast. 'No other choice, I'm afraid – unless you want to beach and burn the ships. And I don't think we'll survive that.'

'Twenty ships should have been enough,' Satyrus said.

'Somebody gave Eumeles plenty of warning,' Leon said. 'Listen up, lad. I'm going to put my ships in line and you'll form line behind me. My ships will bite into his line and you punch straight through. Don't stop to fight. Just keep going.'

Leon's plan was practical – if the goal was to save Satyrus's life. Eumeles would execute him without a thought – or worse.

'Don't be a fool, boy!' Leon said. 'If I fall, you avenge me another time.' His dark skin glowed with vitality, and it didn't seem possible that Leon could speak so blithely of his own death. 'If Eumeles captures me, he'll ransom me. I'm worth too much to kill. You – you'd be dead by nightfall. Don't be a fool. Do as I order.'

Abraham nodded soberly. 'He is correct, Satyrus. You can try again next year. Dead, we have all lost our wagers, eh?'

Satyrus bowed his head. 'Very well. We will form the second line and go straight through.'

Leon put his arms around his adoptive nephew, and they hugged, their armour grinding and preventing the embrace from carrying any real warmth. 'See you in Alexandria,' he said.

'In Olbia!' Satyrus said, his voice full of tears.

*

The Alexandrians formed their two lines as they advanced. They had practised formations all the way out from Rhodos, three weeks of sailing and rowing, and their rowers were in top shape. Leon's ships in the first line were as good as Rhodians – highly trained, with professional helmsmen and standing officers who had been at sea their whole lives – indeed, many of them *were* Rhodians, because Leon paid the best wages in the east.

Satyrus had the mercenaries. They weren't bad – again, they were professional seamen. Few of them had the quality of ships that Leon had, although Daedalus of Halicarnassus had a mighty *penteres*, a 'five-er' that stood a man's height further out of the water than a trireme and mounted a pair of heavy scorpions. The *Glory of Demeter* was in the centre of the second line.

None of Leon's captains needed special orders. They could all see the direction of the wind and the might of the opposing armament. The choices were narrow and they were professionals.

Satyrus was on the right of the line, and the next ship over was a former Alexandrian naval vessel, hastily built and hastily sold after last year's campaign, called *Fennel Stalk*, with his flamboyant friend Dionysius in command. 'Bit off more than we can chew, eh?' he called across the water.

'Break through, get your sail up and head for home,' Satyrus called back.

The enemy fleet was just a couple of stades ahead, the eyes painted above the beaks of their rams clear in the golden light. Despite everything, the fact that Leon's ships were coming straight at them seemed to have thrown them into confusion.

'Ten more ships,' Satyrus said.

Diokles nodded, but Abraham shook his head. 'What?'

'He means that they look so bad that if we had ten more ships we could take them – or make a fight of it.' Diokles spat over the side, apparently unconcerned by the odds.

Satyrus ran down the centre catwalk. 'Kalos! Deck master, there! Any man who has a helmet needs to get it on. Oar master, relieve the benches in shifts.' If they actually broke the enemy line, their whole length would be vulnerable to enemy archers. He went back and put a hand on the steering oars. 'That means you, Diokles. Armour up.'

'You have the helm,' Diokles said.

'I have the helm,' Satyrus replied, and the dark-haired man ran off down the deck.

The Alexandrians were closing under a steady stroke, saving energy. The enemy columns – all six of them – were still deploying. The two centre columns had fallen afoul of each other and were delaying the formation, but the consequence was that as the centre fell behind, the flanks reached well out on either side – the worst thing that could happen to the smaller fleet, whether by intention or by accident.

'Leon's signalling,' Abraham called. He had his helmet on, and his voice had a strange resonance.

Satyrus had his own helmet in his hand, but he swung up on a shroud to watch the bright bronze shield flash aboard *Golden Lotus*.

'Arrowhead,' he said. But the flashes went on, and on.

'By the hidden name!' Abraham muttered.

Diokles came back, buckling his scale breastplate. 'Of course, wearing this fucker, I drown if I go over the side.' He looked up. 'Poseidon's watery dick, that's a long signal.'

Satyrus saw that it was in repeat and jumped down from the rail. 'Arrowhead – we're to be the point of the second line. He's not going to engage the centre – he's going to go for the southern edge of the line. At least, I *think* that's what he means. Prepare to turn to starboard!' Satyrus called the last in a command voice.

Diokles got his last buckle done. He tugged the scale shirt down on his hips so that the *pteruges* sat right, and then put his hands on the steering oars. 'Got him!' he said.

Satyrus shook his head. 'After the turn,' he said. 'Find me my greaves, will you?'

Diokles ducked his head and started to root through the leather bags stuffed under the helmsman's bench.

Satyrus watched the shield. There. The command ship gave a single flash and all down the line, ships turned to starboard, so that the two lines of ten ships heading east were once again two columns of ten ships heading due south.

The shield flashed again, repeating the next order. In the column next to them, Theron's *Labours of Herakles* was slow

to turn and almost fouled the *Glory of Demeter*. The two ships brushed past each other, oar-tips entangled, but momentum saved them and Theron's rowers had the stroke back.

Abraham shook his head. 'I can't watch!' he said. 'This is not like fighting elephants!' Abraham had proved his courage at Gaza the year before, capturing Demetrios the Golden's elephants and winning a place on the list of Alexandria's heroes.

The shield flashed on, now repeating the order. Then the flashes stopped.

'Any time,' Diokles said.

'Take the helm,' Satyrus said.

'I have it,' Diokles said, suiting action to word.

'You have it!' Satyrus said, and ran for the command spot amidships. 'Watch for the signal! Neiron, the next signal will require us to slow.'

'Aye aye!' Neiron, the oar master, was Cardian – a prisoner of war who'd chosen to remain with his captors. He seldom wore hat or helmet, and had the habit of rubbing the back of his head. He did so now.

The bronze shield gave a single flash.

'Got it!' Neiron called. 'All banks! Cease rowing!'

Behind them, *Fennel Stalk* made a quarter-turn out of line to the north and the ship behind *Fennel* made a quarter-turn south, so that in a few heartbeats they were ranging almost alongside, just a few oar-lengths behind. The next two ships came up on their flanks, so that Satyrus's second line was shaped like a wedge.

Whatever the odds, it was well carried out, and despite some spacing issues created by the size of the *Glory of Demeter*, they were formed in a wedge before the enemy could react. Ahead, Leon's better-trained column had angled in to cover them and then formed a wedge themselves, so that *Golden Lotus* was the centre of the first line and *Black Falcon* was the centre of the second wedge, all rowing east against the flank of the enemy line.

The enemy ships were caught broadside-on, strung out over a stade of quiet sea in the morning light. Moments before, they had been the horns of a giant envelopment, hunters of the doomed prey. Suddenly they were the target, and the opposite horn was

six stades away – hopelessly far to take part in the sort of *diekplous* head-to-head engagement that the Alexandrians were forcing.

Diokles grinned. ‘That was something worth seeing,’ he announced.

A stade to go, and the enemy ships were turning to face them. The enemy centre, now more than two stades off to the east, was still tangled.

Another signal from the *Lotus* and the first line picked up speed. *Fennel* took up the stroke in the second line, advancing at battle speed until his helmsman realized his error. The second line was there to take advantage of the chaos caused by the first. They continued to move at cruising speed, and *Fennel* coasted back to his spot.

‘Don’t board unless we’re sinking,’ Satyrus said to Abraham. ‘Understand?’

Abraham gave his sarcastic smile. ‘All too well, brother.’

They embraced briefly, and then Abraham buckled the cheek-pieces on his high-ridged Thracian helmet and ran down the catwalk to the marines that he commanded.

Satyrus had time to gulp a few lungfuls of air and to feel the flutter in his chest and the cringing in his bowels – the fear that never seemed to change for him when danger came. He spat over the side and prayed to Herakles, his ancestor and patron, for courage.

Half a stade ahead, *Golden Lotus* seemed to dance, a swift quarter-turn and then back to his course, his oars suddenly in. *Lotus* was the point of the wedge, the first ship to hit the enemy line, and he was ramming an enemy trireme head to head, the most dangerous manoeuvre in war at sea and the most likely to cripple the attacking ship.

There was a sound not unlike that of two phalanxes crashing into each other – or like a lightning storm ripping through the woods on the slopes of a mountain – and the engagement was over, the *Lotus* already getting his oars out and coasting free, the enemy ship half-turned to starboard and showing his flank to the *Falcon* because the *Lotus* had ripped his starboard oar gallery and mangled his oarsmen on that side.

‘Ramming speed,’ Satyrus said.

Diokles made a face in the stern. The oar master called the new speed and the ship leaped forward.

‘What?’ Satyrus asked.

‘We’re supposed to break free, not kill ships,’ Diokles said.

‘I’m not afraid to fight,’ Satyrus said.

Diokles shrugged and said nothing.

‘Ready for impact!’ Abraham bellowed from the bow.

‘Oars in!’ Neiron called.

Satyrus braced himself against the stern and Diokles crossed his arms over the steering oars.

As they crashed together, the ram went in, and there was resistance – and then something gave. Men on the deck crew were thrown flat, despite their best efforts, and Satyrus only just kept his feet.

‘Reverse oars! Cross your benches!’ Neiron called.

Satyrus ran forward. The enemy ship, caught almost broadside-on, was turning turtle, his shallow side crushed amidships, so that he was filling with water. But the upper strakes of his well-built hull were caught on the *Falcon’s* ram.

‘Back water!’ Satyrus called. ‘We’re caught!’

The oarsmen had to get under their oars and sit on the opposite bench to put their full strength into backing water. It took precious time.

Falcon’s bow began to sink. The strain on the bow timbers was immense, and there were popping noises all along the hull.

Neiron stood on his deck by the mast, watching the oarsmen and rubbing his head. ‘Don’t rush ’em, sir,’ he said. ‘We need three good pulls, not a new mess as they panic.’ He flashed Satyrus a smile and then raised his voice. ‘Ready there?’

A deep roar answered him.

‘Backstroke! Give way, all!’ he called, and the oars bit into the water. One stroke and there was a grinding from the bow – a second stroke and every man standing was thrown flat as the ram slipped out of the stricken enemy and the bow rose sharply. The rowers lost the stroke and oars clashed.

Satyrus fell heavily and Neiron fell on top of him, and it took them long heartbeats to get back to their feet. Neiron began to yell at the rowers, getting them on beat again.

Satyrus ran for the bow, looking everywhere. To the east, *Fennel* had swept down the side of a heavy trireme, destroying his starboard oars just as the ship in the first line had done to his port oar bank, so that the ship lay on the water like an insect with all its legs plucked.

To the west, a Cardian mercenary vessel had sailed right through the enemy's first line and continued into their half-formed second line, where he was preparing a *diekplous* oar-rake of his own.

Dead ahead, *Lotus* had rammed a second adversary and left him wallowing, oars crushed and the upper oar box literally bleeding red blood where the ram had crushed wood and bodies together.

Farther east and west, however, the enemy was rallying. They had so many ships that the local disaster didn't materially affect the odds. The enemy centre was still not organized, but a dozen ships, better rowed or more aggressive, were leaving the centre and racing to relieve the beleaguered flank.

Satyrus took this in and ran back amidships. 'Switch your oars,' he said to the oar master.

'Switch benches for normal rowing!' the oar master called.

Satyrus pointed at the second cripple left by the *Lotus*. 'I want to put that ship down – but don't hit it so hard!' Then he ran aft to Diokles. 'Straight into the blue trireme!' he called.

Diokles narrowed his eyes. 'Not what your uncle ordered,' he said.

'Just do it!' Satyrus said. An arrow hit him in the shoulder, skidded across the scales of his corslet's left shoulder, dug a furrow across the back of his neck and sank into the planking that was supposed to protect the helmsman. 'Ares!' he cursed. He put his hand to his neck and it came away covered in blood.

Satyrus turned to see where the arrow had come from. A dark-hulled trireme was coming up on his port side, from behind, and the enemy ship's archers were trying to clear his helm.

'Where in Hades did he come from?' Satyrus asked. 'Hard to port!'

Diokles swung the oars hard. Satyrus turned forward. 'Port-side oars, all banks, drag your oars!'

The oar master echoed his command and the *Falcon* turned

like his namesake, his stern pulled clear of the oncoming ram. The oar-raked carcass of *Glory of Demeter*'s first victim had hidden the enemy ship, and now he shot by *Falcon*'s stern at ramming speed, already turning to find new prey. Forward, Abraham's marines shot a shower of arrows into the enemy ship's command deck and then he was gone.

Falcon's evasive manoeuvre had carried him out of his place in the formation and now he was heading almost due north, into the oncoming rams of the enemy's relief column.

'*Glory of Demeter* is through the line,' Diokles said. 'Getting his sail up. Just where we ought to be, sir.'

Satyrus's neck hurt as if he'd been stepped on by a horse. He put a hand to it again and was shocked to see how much blood there was. 'Diokles, we need to go hard to starboard – see the dark green-hulled ship with the golden statue in the bow?'

'I see him,' Diokles answered.

'Right at him – at ramming speed. But just short of him, we turn – and pass under his stern. If he turns towards us—'

'I have it!' Diokles yelled, waving him away.

Satyrus ran for the oar master. 'Ramming speed. Turn to starboard – see the big green? Straight at him – ramming speed. And when I say, a little more. We'll pass under his stern and never touch him.'

Neiron had an arrow in his side. 'Fucking point is in my skin,' he said, face already grey-white with shock. The arrow had punched straight through his tawed-leather cuirass. 'Aye! Starboard bank – drag your oars! Port banks, full speed! Now!' His voice lost none of its power. Then he sank against the mast. 'Pull it out, sir?'

Satyrus glanced forward – the next few heartbeats would be vital.

'As soon as we're past the green,' he said.

'Aye,' Neiron said grimly. His feet slipped out from under him and he sat heavily, with his back against the mast. 'You'd better call the stroke,' he said.

Satyrus stepped over him. 'Pull!' he called. An arrow hit his helmet hard enough that he smelled copper and his ears rang. 'Pull!' he called again. The bow was almost on line – time to stop

the turn. 'Cease rowing!' he called. 'All oars! Ramming speed! Now!'

He felt the surge of power under his feet. 'Pull!' he called.

He felt the change in weight as Diokles made a steering adjustment. The big green ship was turning to meet them. He towered over them – a quadrireme at least, perhaps the biggest ship in the enemy fleet.

'Pull!' Satyrus wanted to get past the green so his bulk would shield them from the rest of the enemy squadrons. He looked down at his oar master, who was losing consciousness, his face as pale and grey as the sea on a cloudy summer day. There was blood coming out from under his cuirass. Another arrow struck deep in the mast, its barbed head a finger deep in the oak.

'Pull!'

Sakje bows.

He glanced south as he took a breath to call the stroke and almost lost his timing. There was Theron's *Herakles* at ramming speed, bow-on to the same target – going ram to ram with a ship of twice his burthen. 'Pull!' he called.

Diokles saw Theron too. 'He'll foul us!' the Phoenician roared. 'Sheer off, Corinthian!'

'All you have, now!' Satyrus roared at the rowers. *Falcon* moved under his feet. 'Pull!' The great loom of the oars moved, the oars, the length of a Macedonian sarissa, all pulling together like the legs of a water-bug or the wings of a bird. 'Pull!'

Diokles made a sharp adjustment and Satyrus struggled to keep his feet. 'Pull!' he roared. *Herakles* was not turning – he was in his final attack run, moving as fast as a running horse.

'Pull!'

The green enemy turned to put his bow on to the *Herakles* – a terrible decision, possibly a misheard order, so that at the last the great ship showed his naked and vulnerable flank to the *Falcon's* ram.

'Pull!'

Herakles, faster because he'd had a longer start, rammed her just aft of the bow – a single thunderclap – and his bow was forced around.

'Pull!'

Diokles slapped his steering oars with precision, aiming for the gap at the edge of possibility where the stern of the enemy ship would *not* be in a few heartbeats.

‘Pull!’

The green ship shuddered and his stern came *at them*, swinging sideways through the water with all the transmitted energy of *Herakles’* attack.

‘Pull!’ Satyrus roared.

‘Brace!’ Abraham yelled from over the ram – and they struck, the ram catching the enemy stern just below the helmsman with a hollow *boom*, and then Satyrus was on his face on the deck.

‘Switch your benches!’ Satyrus managed from his prone position. ‘Do you hear me, there? Switch benches!’ he called, trying to rise. There was a sailor on top of him, a deckhand – a dead deckhand. Satyrus got him off, rolled over – his neck awash in pain, his eyes hazed red. The big green ship was *above* them, and arrows were *pouring* into the waist of the *Falcon*. ‘Switch your benches!’ Satyrus called again. He felt as if he was very far away. Just below his feet, men were getting under their oars.

An arrow hit him in the top of the shoulder. It hurt, and its force knocked him back a step. ‘Backstroke!’ he shouted, his voice sounding thin and very far away. ‘Now!’

The ship gave a shudder like a wounded animal.

‘Ram’s stuck!’ Abraham called. ‘Ware boarding!’

Sure enough, there were men coming down the side of the green – leaping aboard *Falcon*. Satyrus was three steps from his *aspis*, the huge round shield of the Greek soldiers and marines. It stood in the rack at the edge of the command platform.

Satyrus had an odd moment of hesitation – he almost didn’t move. It seemed *too far*. He just wanted to fall on the deck and bleed.

A javelin, slightly miscast, struck him shaft first and skittered off along the deck.

There was a pair of enemy marines on the command platform. He noticed this with professional interest. *How had they come there?*

He turned his back on them and grabbed for his *aspis*. It came to him in stages that were prolonged by the nakedness of his

posture to their weapons – his hand on the bronze-shod edge, his right hand lifting it clear of the rack, his left arm pushing into the *porpax*, his shoulder taking the curved weight as he turned—

Thrunck – as the lead marine crashed shield to shield and the harmonic bronze sounded.

Satyrus set his feet and reached out with his empty right hand to grab the rim of his opponent's shield. One-handed, he ripped the shield round a half-circle to the right, breaking the man's shield arm, and then he slammed the enemy's shield rim into his nose. The man went down and Satyrus leaped at his partner, drawing his father's heavy *kopis* from under his own shield arm even as he put his head down and rushed his new opponent. Movement from the stern. Satyrus struck his enemy shield to shield and cut hard around the lower edge of the aspis. His blade went deep into the man's thigh and he was over the side. Satyrus whirled, but the man coming from the stern was an armed deck-crewman with a spear – one of his own.

'Pull!' he called. The oars bit the water – the stroke was lost and had to be restored.

As the oars came up, he saw more men coming from the bow. Was Abraham dead? 'Pull!' he called as the top of the stroke was reached. 'Neiron! I need you to call the stroke. Pull!'

Neiron was sitting against the mast, his eyes unfocused.

There were three more enemy marines, and they were cautious. On the leader's command, they all threw their javelins together, and Satyrus took them on his shield and charged, shouting 'Pull!' as his war cry. He got his shield into the middle one, took a light cut on his greaves from the one to his front right and punched the hilt of the Aegyptian sword into the man's face over his shield rim – all feint for the backhand cut that Greeks called the 'Harmodius blow'. Satyrus stepped forward with his sword foot, changing his weight with the feint and pushing his shield into the other two, and then cut *back* at the man who had wounded him, the weight of his blow sheering through the man's helmet.

Satyrus ripped the Aegyptian weapon free of the man's head and the blade snapped – and Satyrus fell back a step. *My father's sword!* he thought.

The deck-crewman behind him saved his life, plunging his

spear past Satyrus's shoulder into the centre man's face. The blow skidded off the man's chin and through his cheek and he went down, fouling his file-partner, whose feet had been grabbed by an alert oarsman on the oar deck below. He fell into the rowers and died at their hands.

'Pull!' Neiron called.

With a shriek like a wounded woman, *Falcon* pulled free of the green vessel, trapping the enemy marines on his decks. Many elected to jump – men in light armour could swim long enough to be rescued – but the officers in heavy bronze were trapped. Satyrus watched sailors pull one down and throw him to his death in the water. Abraham accepted the surrender of another – Abraham was the only man Satyrus had ever seen accept surrender in a sea fight.

'Oh, Ares!' Satyrus said. He could just walk.

'Pull!' Neiron called, and the *Falcon* was a ship's length clear of their enemy.

'Switch your benches!' Satyrus called. He looked aft. Diokles had an arrow through his thigh and was using the oars to keep himself erect.

Their ram had, in fact, ripped the stern right off the green ship, and he was settling fast, his rowers in chaos. But the enemy was trying to take Theron's ship over the bow as a stolen life-raft. Satyrus could see Theron with his marines fighting in the bow. He was the biggest man in the fight.

North and west, the whole enemy fleet was bearing down on their fight. The rest of their squadrons were gone. Just a stade away, a pair of golden-yellow triremes had bow waves – full ramming speed.

'Diokles!' Satyrus yelled, pointing at the new enemy.

Diokles was already leaning on his oars, using the momentum of the backed oars to turn the bow south.

Satyrus saw it as if a god had stepped up next to him and put the whole idea in his mind – he saw the fight and what he had to do.

As the bow swung south, he saw more and more enemy sailors and marines flooding aboard *Herakles*.

'Lay me alongside *Herakles*,' Satyrus said.

Diokles bit his lip and said nothing.

Satyros accepted his unspoken criticism and ran forward, collecting deck-crewmen with weapons as he went.

‘Abraham!’ he called.

Neiron called the first stroke of the new motion. His voice was weak, but he had to hold on. Satyros was running out of options, and he was *not* going to abandon Theron.

Abraham was kneeling by a dying marine. The man was bleeding out and Abraham was holding his hand.

Satyros waited until the man’s eyes fluttered closed. Then he seized the dead man’s javelin and his sword. ‘We’re going aboard *Herakles*,’ he said.

Abraham shook his head. ‘You’re insane,’ he said quietly.

‘I’m not letting Theron die when I can save him,’ Satyros bit back.

‘What about the rest of us?’ Abraham asked. ‘*Punch straight through!* Isn’t that what we’re supposed to do?’

Satyros shook his head to clear it. It seemed so obvious to him. ‘We put the green ship between us and those two,’ he said, pointing at the nearest new enemies, now just half a stade away. ‘We rescue Theron and we’re gone.’

Abraham shrugged. He had blood leaking out of an eye – or perhaps just out of his helmet. ‘Whatever you say, *prince*.’

The rest of the marines looked tired but hardly done in. Most of them had fought at Gaza.

‘On to the deck of the *Herakles*,’ Satyros said. ‘Clear it and we’re gone. A gold rose of Rhodos to every man who follows me on to that deck.’

Even as Satyros spoke, Diokles had the speed to turn them back east, so that the oarsmen pulled in their oars and *Falcon* coasted alongside his stricken brother.

Satyros leaped on to the rail. ‘Clear the deck,’ he called, his voice breaking, but then he was over the rail of the *Herakles* and his javelin took an enemy marine in the side of the head, knocking him unconscious inside his helmet. Satyros went straight into the next man, shield up, so that the rim of his own aspis crashed into the man’s armoured jaw and he smelled the sweat on his enemy as the man tried to turn and got a spear in his teeth from a

sailor. Satyrus bore him down and pushed on into the flank of the enemy boarding force, into the unarmoured sailors who didn't have shields and died like sacrificial animals under his borrowed blade. And when they broke, he kept killing them, cutting them down as they fled into the bow, killing them even as they jumped over the side, as if by killing these men who served his enemy he could regain his lost kingdom.

Theron was by the mast, his back against it. He was covered in blood and wounded several times – his left thigh was lacerated with shallow wounds so that blood ran down his legs like lava from a new volcano. He held up a hand, the same way he would when he'd been fighting the *pankration* on the sands of the palaestra in Alexandria and he took a fall. He managed a smile. 'Still in the fight, eh?' he said.

Satyrus took his hand and hauled him to his feet. He looked fore and aft along the deck. The marines from the heavy green quadrireme were rallying in the bows of their own ship, and a shower of arrows swept the decks of *Herakles*.

'We could board him,' Satyrus said.

'If you want to die gloriously, that would be your path,' Abraham said by his elbow. He was wrapping his shield arm in linen stripped from a corpse. 'Look!'

The two golden-hulled triremes from Pantecapaeum were almost aboard them, rowing hard – but their speed had fallen off, because they'd started their sprint too early and their crews were under-trained. In the press of ships, they couldn't see what was friend and what was foe. Behind them were a dozen more triremes.

'We could take him,' Satyrus said.

'You are possessed by a bad spirit,' Abraham said. 'Do not succumb to these blandishments.' He leaned in. 'You must live, or all this is for nothing. *Get your head out of your arse and think like a commander.*'

Satyrus felt the heat in his own face – felt rage boiling up in his limbs. But he also saw the faces of the men around him. He saw Theron's nod of agreement. The marines' studied blankness.

'Very well,' he said, more harshly than he wanted. He looked across to the *Falcon*. 'Abraham, keep us from getting boarded again. When I have *Herakles* clear of that green bastard, take

command and row clear. Understand? Theron – someone get Theron looked after. No, better – sling him across to *Falcon*.’

His head was clear – tired, but clear. It was like waking from a fever. Now he could *see*, and what he saw was the last few moments of a disaster. As soon as the pair of golden triremes figured out which side was which, he’d be dead.

He leaped for his own ship and landed with a clash of bronze on the deck. ‘Diokles!’ he roared.

‘Aye!’ his helmsman called. The arrow was gone from his thigh and a loop of wool was tied in its place.

‘Port-side oars! Pole off! Pole off the *Herakles*!’ Satyrus ran to Neiron, who was lying at the foot of his mast, mouthing orders to Thron, one of the Aegyptian boys who served the sailors. The boy shrilled the orders down into the rowing decks.

‘Still with me?’ Satyrus asked Neiron, who raised an eyebrow.

‘Must be nice ... young.’ He croaked. ‘Poseidon, I hurt. Hermes who watches the sailormen, watch over me. Arggh!’ he shouted, and his back arched.

Along the deck, a handful of deck-crewmen pulled Theron aboard and dropped him unceremoniously to the deck so that they could return to using pikes to pole off the *Herakles*. Satyrus loosed the ties on Neiron’s cuirass and then, without warning, pulled the arrowhead from the wound. It had gone in only the depth of a finger end, or even less – enough to bleed like a spring, but not necessarily mortal.

Satyrus stood in his place. ‘Port side, push!’ he shouted. Rowers used the blades of their oars to push against the hull of the *Herakles*. ‘Push!’

‘We’re away!’ Diokles called from the stern. The gap between the two ships was growing. *Falcon* was light – fifty strong men could pole him off very quickly.

Quick glance aft – the golden hulls were changing direction, the early sun catching the bronze of their rams and turning them to fire. He wasn’t going to make it.

He wasn’t going to stop trying, either.

‘Switch your benches!’ he roared, the full stretch of his voice, as if a restraint had burst in his chest and now he could use all of his lungs.

A thin cheer from the green quadrireme. The enemy crews were shouting for rescue – shouting to the golden ships.

His archer-captain shot into the enemy, and an enemy archer fell – a man in robes. A Sakje. Satyrus cursed that Eumeles had suborned *his own people*. There were many things that he and Leon had taken for granted.

The greens cheered again and the golden triremes turned harder, now certain of their prey.

‘Oars out! Backstroke! Give way, all!’ Satyrus called as soon as the majority of his rowers had switched their benches. He considered everything he had learned of war – that men responded so much better when they understood what was needed. His teachers had insisted on it.

He leaned down into the oar deck. ‘Listen, friends. Three strokes back and switch your benches – two strokes forward – switch again. Got it? It will come fast and furious after that. Ready?’

Hardly a cheer – but a growl of response.

‘Pull!’ he called.

‘Athena and strong arms!’ a veteran cried.

‘Athena and strong arms!’ the whole oar deck shouted, all together, and the ship shot back his own length.

‘Athena and strong arms!’ they repeated, and again *Falcon* moved, gliding free.

‘Switch your benches!’ Satyrus called, but many men were already moving with the top of the stroke, switching benches with a fluidity he hadn’t seen before.

He ran along the deck to Diokles. He wanted to stop and pant. *No time.*

The nearest golden hull was just three ship’s lengths away.

‘Into the starboard bow of the green!’ Satyrus shouted. ‘We have to ram the green clear of *Herakles*.’

Diokles turned and looked at the onrushing golden ship in the lead.

‘Yes!’ Satyrus shouted. He read Diokles’ thoughts just as the helmsman read his. With luck – Tyche – the lead golden hull would foul his partner.

There were a dozen more triremes behind that pair, strung out over two stades of water.

The rowers had switched benches. ‘Pull!’ he bellowed into the oar deck.

The hull changed direction. The oars came up together, rolled over the top of their path.

‘Pull!’ he roared. The hull groaned and *Falcon* leaped forward – already turning under steering oars alone.

‘Pull!’ he called as the oars crested their movement. He waited for the splintering crash as the lead golden ship rammed their stern, but he didn’t look. His eyes were fixed on his oarsmen.

‘Pull!’

‘BRACE!’ yelled a sailor in the bow.

Falcon hit the enemy quadrireme just where his marine box towered over his ram – just where men were rallying for another rush at the *Herakles*. It was a glancing blow, delivered from too close, but the results were spectacular. Something in the enemy bow gave with a sharp crack – some timber strained to breaking by the *Herakles* snapped. The marines’ tower tilted sharply and the whole green hull began to roll over, filling rapidly with water.

‘Switch your benches!’ Satyrus called. Now was the moment. But the *Herakles* was saved – he was rocking in the water like a fishing boat after pulling a shark aboard, his trapped ram released from the stricken green.

The lead golden trireme shaved past their stern, having missed his ram by the length of a rowing boat. He was still turning and his oarsmen paid for his careless steering as they began to get tangled in the wreckage of the green as the stricken ship turtled.

Just to the port side, beyond *Herakles*, the second golden hull swooped in to beak the *Herakles* amidships – the second ship had been more careful, biding his time, waiting for the two damaged Alexandrian ships to commit to a reverse course.

The oarsmen were reversed, their faces to the bow. ‘Back water! Pull!’ Satyrus called. Had to try.

Had to try.

Diokles shook his head and braced himself against the side. When the golden ship struck the *Herakles*, his hull might be pushed right into them.

Abraham was shouting at his rowers, trying to get them to pull

together. They had been locked in a boarding action for too long and many men had left their benches to fight. *Herakles* was dead in the water.

Why was *Herakles* cheering? Satyrus stood on his toes, then jumped up on the rail, grabbing for a stay.

Leon's *Golden Lotus* swept past the sinking stern of the green like an avenging sea monster and took the second golden hull right in the stern quarter, his bow ripping the enemy ship like a shark ripping a dolphin, spilling men into the water and goring his side so that he sank still rowing forward, gone in ten heartbeats, and *Lotus* swept on.

Herakles got his rowers together. With time to breathe, Abraham rowed clear of the sinking green and turned for the open water to the east. He had only two-thirds of his oars in action, but they were together.

Falcon handled badly – light as a feather, down by the stern, tending to fall off every heading. The rowers were pulling well, and he handled like a pig.

Satyrus was staring over the stern, where *Lotus* had rammed a second ship.

His ram was stuck.

Even as he watched, an enemy ship got his ram into *Lotus*, and the great ship shuddered the way a lion does when he takes the first spear in a hunt.

Satyrus ran to the stern, as if he could run over the rail and the intervening sea to his uncle's rescue.

'Nothing we can do,' Diokles said.

'Ares – Poseidon. We can do this. With *Herakles*, we'll—'

Diokles shook his head. 'Can't you feel it, lad? Our ram's gone. Ripped clean off when we hit the green.'

Satyrus felt as if he'd been punched in the gut. Leon was *so close*.

'He did it for you,' Diokles said. 'Let's save the ships we have and run.'

'Herakles, Lord of Heroes,' Satyrus choked on his own prayer.

Run, boy.

A second ram went into *Lotus*. And while he contemplated suicide in the form of rushing his ship to Leon's rescue, the gap

widened to two stades, then three. Then five. Now there were a dozen enemy ships around *Lotus*.

‘Run,’ he said, hanging his head.

‘Aye,’ Diokles said. ‘Now get yourself into the bow and set the men to plugging the gaps in the strakes, or we’re all dead men.’