



SHIP OF ROME

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HarperCollins *Publishers*

To my beloved Adrienne

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CHAPTER ONE

For an instant the low sun shone through the surrounding fog to illuminate the lone figure on the foredeck of the *Aquila*. Atticus had been motionless but the momentary shot of sunlight caused him to quickly lower his head and close his eyes tightly against the light. He raised his hand instinctively and rubbed his eyes with his thumb and forefinger, trying to wipe away the tiredness he could feel in every part of his body. Slowly raising his head, he spied the winter sun, estimating it to be no more than an hour above the horizon, its weakened rays only now beginning to burn off the sea mist which had rolled in so ponderously the evening before, and so the Roman galley continued to be enveloped in the all-consuming embrace of the fog.

The *Aquila*, the Eagle, was a trireme, a galley with three rows of oars manned by two hundred chain-bound slaves. She was of the new cataphract style, with an enclosed upper deck that protected the rowers beneath and improved the ship's performance in heavy weather. As a galley she was a breed apart, the pinnacle of Roman naval technology and a fearsome weapon.

As the onshore wind freshened, blowing a cooling mist into his face, Atticus opened his mouth slightly to heighten his sense of smell. The oncoming wind and his position at the front of the trireme allowed him to filter out his surroundings, the salt-laden air, the smouldering charcoal braziers and the stench emanating from the slave decks below. The breeze would help conceal the *Aquila*, robbing an approaching ship of the opportunity of picking up the all-too-familiar smells of a Roman galley.

With his vision impaired by fog and, before that, darkness, Atticus had planned on detecting his prey by sound, specifically by the rhythmic beat of the drum marking the oar-strokes of the enemy bireme's two rows of galley slaves. He knew from reports that the galley they were hunting would be travelling close to the shore, passing the inlet that hid the *Aquila* from the main channel. The fog afforded the Roman galley extended cover now that the sun had risen, but it was fickle and Atticus knew he could not rely on it as he had on the darkness of the pre-dawn.

Hobnails reverberating on the timber decking indicated a legionary's approach, and Atticus turned to watch the soldier emerge from the fog behind him. He was a *hastatus*, a junior soldier recently recruited and untested in battle. He stood tall with broad shoulders, his upper arm disproportionately developed from long hours training with a *gladius*, the short sword of the Roman infantry. He wore full battledress and, although his face was expressionless beneath the iron helmet, Atticus sensed the man's confidence.

The legionary stopped four feet short of Atticus and stood to attention, raising his right fist and slamming it into his chest, a salute to the captain of the ship standing before him. The sound of the soldier's fist against chain mail sounded unnaturally loud in the quiet of the morning. The silence was shattered, a silence needed to ensure the *Aquila* remained undetected. As the legionary drew himself to his full height in anticipation of addressing a senior officer, Atticus reacted.

'Beg to report, Captain,' the legionary declared in a strident voice. As per regulation, he was looking straight ahead, but his eyes dropped quickly as the captain suddenly lunged at him, his expression murderous. The soldier tried to react but the movement was too quick and he felt the captain's hand close over his mouth.

'Keep your voice down, you whoreson,' Atticus hissed. 'Are you looking to have us all killed?' The legionary's eyes widened in surprise and alarm as both his hands wrapped themselves around

the captain's wrist in an attempt to ease the pressure over his mouth. Panic flared as he realized that the grip was vicelike, the muscles in the captain's arm like iron, the pressure unrelenting. Atticus relaxed his hold a little and the legionary gulped air into his lungs, dread still in his eyes which moments ago had showed only confidence. Atticus removed his hand, his face expressing the warning for silence that needed no vocal manifestation.

'I, I...' the legionary spluttered.

'Easy soldier,' said Atticus, 'breathe easy.'

As if for the first time, Atticus noticed how young the legionary was, barely eighteen at most. Septimus, the marine centurion, had twenty such *hastati* under his command. Fresh from the barracks and before that a Roman family, these boys had eagerly signed on at sixteen to fulfil their duty as Roman citizens.

'The centurion...' the soldier began haltingly, 'the centurion wishes to speak with you.'

'Tell him I cannot leave the foredeck.'

The soldier nodded, as if the effort to speak was too much. He straightened up slowly.

'Yes, Captain.'

Once again he stood to attention, though not as sharply as before. He began to salute but stopped short of hitting his chest, his eyes locked on those of Atticus.

'I'm sorry, Captain...about before...'

'No shame, soldier, now report to the centurion.'

The legionary did an about-face and marched off, although this time with a softer step. Atticus watched him leave and smiled to himself. Ever since Septimus had come aboard the *Aquila* ten months ago, he had tried to impose his will on Atticus. As captain, Atticus was responsible for the ship and its crew of sailors, while Septimus was responsible for the reduced century of sixty marine infantry stationed on board. The ranks were, to all intents and purposes, equal, and it was the responsibility of both men to maintain the status quo between the commands. Atticus turned and took up his position at the bow of the trireme. He instinctively checked the line of his ship, satisfying himself that the four rowers, two fore and two aft, were keeping the trireme midstream. He became motionless again, rock steady, refocusing all his senses on the task at hand. As suddenly as it had blown up, the onshore breeze disappeared, robbing the *Aquila* of that additional advantage, shifting the odds again, this time in favour of the prey.

Septimus stood tall at the front of his assembled century in the aft section of the main deck. At six foot four inches and two hundred and twenty pounds he was a formidable sight. The centurion stood with his feet slightly apart, balancing himself against the gentle rolling of the deck, his right hand resting lightly on the hilt of his *gladius*, his left arm encircling his helmet. His dark Italian features were accentuated by a tangle of black curly hair, giving him a permanently dishevelled look.

The centurion had been standing ready since before dawn, over two hours in full battledress. The waiting never bothered Septimus. Over his twelve-year career as a Roman infantryman, he had developed the endless patience of the professional soldier. He began his career not long after the Battle of Beneventum, when the Roman legions finally routed the army of Pyrrhus of Epirus, the Greek aggressor who had sought to subdue Rome and expand his kingdom across the Adriatic. When before the legions would have been disbanded after a campaign, the ferocity and swiftness of Pyrrhus's attack persuaded Rome that she needed to maintain a standing army, trained, disciplined and ever ready. Septimus was one of this new breed, a career soldier, honed through discipline and battle, the backbone of the ever-expanding Republic.

The year before he had fought at the Battle of Agrigentum, the first pitched battle against the Carthaginians, the Punici, on the island of Sicily. As a member of the *principes*, the best fighting men of the legion, he had been positioned in one of the centre maniples of the second line of the three-line *triplex acies* formation. He was an *optio*, second-in-command to his centurion, and, after the first line of *hastati* had been overwhelmed by the Carthaginians, he had helped steady the line before the Romans turned the tide of battle and broke the Carthaginian front. His actions that day had come to the attention of the commander, Lucius Postumius Megellus, and he had been rewarded with promotion to the rank of centurion.

‘Alone, of course,’ he thought to himself with a smile, as he watched the legionary return from the foredeck of the trireme through the dissipating fog. He had known that Atticus would not come for him. Before being assigned to the *Aquila*, Septimus had had no respect for sailors. His first experience at sea had been only four years earlier, when the Roman task force of four legions, some forty thousand men, were ferried in barges across the Strait of Messina to Sicily to counter the Carthaginian threat to that island. It was the first time the Roman legions had deployed off the mainland, but the sea trip had only been one link in a chain that saw the legions travel from their respective camps around Rome to the battlefields of Sicily. In his eyes, the sailors had been no different from the myriad of support people who serviced the fighting men of the legions, and their ships were unwieldy, uncomfortable hulks.

The *Aquila*, however, was a different breed of ship. Powered by both sail and the strength of two hundred slaves, she was capable of incredible speed and manoeuvrability, a stallion in comparison to the pack mules that were the transport barges he had first encountered. Atticus was the perfect foil for the *Aquila*. Completely at home on the deck of his ship, he had an innate ability to get the best out of both his crew and his ship. Septimus’s respect for sailors was born out of his respect for Atticus. On the two previous occasions the *Aquila* had gone into action since Septimus had been assigned to her, the captain had proved himself to be the equal of any centurion.

Septimus noticed that the legionary was treading softly on the timber deck, and when he saluted it was not with the usual vigour.

‘Well, soldier, where is he?’ Septimus asked with underlying menace.

The legionary hesitated. ‘The captain said he can’t leave the foredeck.’

In the silence that followed, the soldier waited for the rebuke that was sure to follow, bracing himself. Septimus noticed his expression and smiled inwardly.

‘Very well,’ the centurion said tersely, ‘get back to your position.’

The legionary saluted again and with relief retook his position in the ranks.

‘Quintus,’ Septimus called over his shoulder, ‘take command. I’m going to see the captain.’

‘Yes, Centurion,’ the *optio* replied as he moved front and centre.

Septimus took off towards the foredeck, passing several of the ship’s crew as he went. They had been busy since dawn, preparing the ship for action, a routine drilled so well that all work was carried out without comment or command. He approached the captain slowly.

Atticus stood at the very front of the foredeck, leaning slightly over the rail as if to extend his reach through the impenetrable fog. He cocked his head slightly as he picked up Septimus’s approach but did not turn. Atticus was three inches shorter, thirty pounds lighter, and a year older than the centurion. Of Greek ancestry, he was born the son of a fisherman near the city of Locri, a once-Greek city-state of Magna Graecia, ‘Greater Greece’, on the toe of Italy, which Rome had conquered a generation before. Atticus had joined the Roman navy at the age of fourteen, not out of loyalty to the Roman Republic, for he had never seen Rome and knew little of its democracy, but out of what he

believed to be necessity. Like all those who lived on the shores of the Ionian Sea, his family feared the constant attacks of pirates along the Calabrian coast. Atticus had refused to live with this fear, and so he had dedicated his fifteen-yearlong career to hunting pirates, a hunt that he hoped would bear fruit once again that very day.

‘You wanted to speak to me?’ Atticus said without turning.

‘Yes, thanks for coming so quickly,’ Septimus said sarcastically. ‘Well, where are these pirates of yours? I thought they were expected over an hour ago.’

‘I don’t know where they are,’ Atticus replied frustratedly. ‘Our sources said their bireme passed this section of the coast every second day before dawn.’

‘Could your “sources” be wrong?’

‘No, the lives of those fishermen depend on knowing the movements of any pirates in the waters. They’re not wrong...but something is. That ship should have passed by now.’

‘Could you have missed them in the fog?’

‘Doubtful...a pirate bireme? If she passed within a half-league of here I’d have heard the drum master’s beat. No...she hasn’t passed.’

‘What if she were under sail?’

‘She can’t be under sail, not this close to the shore, especially with an intermittent onshore wind.’

Septimus sighed. ‘So what now?’

‘The fog is dissipating. We wait until it’s gone and we move out of this inlet. Without a man on that headland,’ he indicated the opening of the inlet, ‘we don’t have enough advance warning of an approach and we might be spotted in here. We can’t risk being bottled in.’

As if by Atticus’s command, a large gap in the fog opened around them. Septimus was turning to leave the foredeck when the sight off the bow arrested him. At this point on the Calabrian coast the Strait of Messina was over three miles across, and under the blue sky he could see the distant shore of eastern Sicily. However, it was not the magnificent vista opening before him that stopped him short.

‘Now we know why the pirate ship didn’t appear,’ muttered Atticus.

In mid-channel, a league away and directly across from them, three trireme galleys were slowly beating north towards the mouth of the strait. They were a vanguard, scouting ships, moving ponderously under oars in arrowhead formation, unable to utilize their sails in the calm weather of the strait.

‘By the gods,’ whispered Septimus, ‘who are they?’

‘Carthaginians! Tyrian design, heavier than the *Aquila*, rigged for sea crossing. Looks like the fog hid us for just long enough.’

Atticus’s gaze was not on these three ships as he spoke, however. He was looking further south along the strait. At a distance of over two leagues behind the vanguard, Atticus could see the darkened hulls of additional approaching ships, a whole fleet of them led by a quinquereme, a massive galley with three rows of oars like the *Aquila* but with the upper oars manned by two men each.

Septimus noticed Atticus’s gaze and followed its line, instantly spotting the other ships.

‘In Jupiter’s name,’ Septimus said in awe, ‘how many do you think there are?’

‘At least fifty,’ Atticus replied, his expression hard, calculating.

‘So what now?’ Septimus asked, deferring to the man who now controlled their next move.

There was a moment’s silence. Septimus tore his gaze from the approaching fleet and looked at Atticus.

‘Well?’

Atticus turned to look directly at the centurion.

‘Now we run.’

Hannibal Gisco, admiral of the Punic fleet and military commander of the Carthaginian forces in Sicily, was a prudent man. Ever since taking command of the Carthaginian invasion of Sicily over five years earlier, he had insisted that any significant fleet of galleys was to be preceded by a vanguard. This ensured that any dangers were detected long before the fleet proper stumbled upon them. The evening before he had transshipped from his flagship quinquereme, the *Melqart*, to the trireme assigned point duty for the coming day's operations, the *Elissar*. They were on their way to Panormus on the northern Sicilian coast, where Gisco planned to deploy his forces back along the coast in an attempt to blockade the Sicilian ports now in Roman hands, thereby hampering their supply lines from the mainland. The captain of the galley had naturally given up his cabin for the admiral; although the cabin was comfortable, Gisco had slept fitfully, the anticipation of the coming day running through his mind. They were to pass through the mouth of the strait, where Sicily and the mainland were separated by only a league, a mere two thousand five hundred yards, and a natural route for Roman supplies. As the commander of the vanguard he planned on being one of the first to draw Roman blood that day.

Gisco had arisen at dawn and taken his place on the foredeck of the *Elissar*. It felt good to be in command of a single ship again, a trireme, the type of ship on which he had first cut his teeth as captain and one which he knew intimately. He had ordered the captain to open the gap between the vanguard and the fleet from the normal distance of one league to two. He remembered sensing the captain stifling a question to the order, but thinking better of it before moving to signal to the other two ships to match his pace. The captain knew the admiral's reputation well.

Only a year before, when Gisco was besieged in the city of Agrigentum on the southwest coast of Sicily, he had continued to resist against all odds, even though the populace, as well as his soldiers, were starving, and all attempts to alert the Carthaginian fleet about the Roman siege had failed. Gisco's tenacity had proved to be well founded, as relief did finally arrive, and although the Carthaginians had lost the ensuing battle and the city, tales of Gisco's fearsome reputation and determined aggression had spread throughout the Carthaginian forces.

Gisco had opened the gap to add a degree of danger to his position. Now if they encountered the enemy it would take the fleet just that little bit longer to arrive in support. He wanted the first encounter of the day to be a reasonably fair fight and not a slaughter. Not from any sense of honour for Gisco believed that honour was a hollow virtue, but from a need to satisfy his appetite for the excitement of battle. More and more his senior rank of overall commander placed him at the rear of battles rather than the front line, and it had been a long time since he had felt the heady blood lust of combat, a feeling he relished and hoped to experience that day.

‘Run...? Where to?’ Septimus asked. ‘Those three ships obviously haven't seen us; maybe we should just sit tight. There's still plenty of fog banks, maybe one will settle over us again.’

‘No, we can't afford to take the chance. The fog is too fickle. We've been lucky once, the lead ships didn't spot us, but their fleet is bound to. There's no way fifty ships will cross our bows without someone spotting us. Our only chance is to outrun them.’

Turning away from Septimus, he called back along the ship, ‘Lucius!’ Within an instant they were joined by the second-in-command of the *Aquila*. ‘Orders to the drum master, Lucius, ahead of the standard. Once we have cleared the inlet, order battle speed. Get all the reserve rowers up from the lower deck.’ Lucius saluted and left.

Atticus turned to the centurion. ‘Septimus, I need ten of your men below decks to help maintain

order. Our rowers may be chained to their oars but I need them obedient and the reserves guarded. I also need marines on the aft-deck – those Punic bastards are going to give chase and I'll need my helmsman protected from Carthaginian archers.' Septimus left the foredeck to arrange his command.

'Runner!' Atticus commanded.

Instantly a sailor was on hand.

'Orders to the helmsman, due north once we clear the inlet. Hug the coast.'

The runner sprinted back along the deck. Atticus felt the galley lurch beneath his feet as two hundred oars bit into the still waters of the inlet simultaneously and the *Aquila* came alive underneath him. Within a minute she had cleared the inlet and the galley hove right as she came around the headland to run parallel to the coastline. As Atticus hoped, there were still some fog banks clinging to the coast, where the change in temperature between land and sea gave the fog a foothold. His helmsman, Gaius, knew this coastline intimately, and would only need intermittent reference points along the shoreline in order to navigate. After fifty yards the *Aquila* was once again hidden within protective fog, but for how long Atticus could only estimate. Although he had told Septimus that he planned to outrun the Carthaginian vanguard, he knew that it would not be possible. One ship could not outrun three. He needed an alternative. There was only one.

'Runner! Orders to the helmsman, once we clear this bank, turn three points to port.'

The runner disappeared. Atticus tried to estimate their position relative to the vanguard. The *Aquila* was moving at battle speed, the vanguard at standard speed. He judged the *Aquila* to be parallel to them...now...now ahead. The longer the fog held, the greater their chances.

It lasted another two thousand yards.

The *Aquila* burst out into open sunshine like a stallion surging from the confines of a stable. At battle speed she was tearing through the water at seven knots, and Atticus noted with satisfaction that within her time enclosed in the fog she had stolen five hundred yards on the Carthaginian vanguard. He was about to turn to the stern of the galley to signal the course change when the *Aquila* responded to Gaius's hand on the rudder. 'Sharp as ever,' Atticus smiled as the galley straightened on her new course, running diagonally across the strait. Now the *Aquila*'s course would take her across the bow of the vanguard, Atticus estimated, at no more than three hundred yards. He gripped the rail of the *Aquila*, feeling the pulse of the ship as the rhythmical pull of the oars propelled it through the water.

'Ship to starboard...Roman trireme...bearing north.'

With an agility that belied his fifty-two years, Gisco ran to the rigging of the mainmast and began to climb to the masthead. Halfway to the top he glanced up to see the lookout point to the mainland. Following this line, he looked out towards the distant coast. Sure enough, some five hundred yards ahead, a Roman trireme was moving at speed along the coast.

'Estimate she is moving at battle speed,' the lookout shouted down after overcoming the shock of seeing the admiral below him. 'She must have been hiding somewhere along the coastline, invisible behind the fog...'

Gisco stared at the Roman trireme and double-checked his estimate of their course. It puzzled him. 'That doesn't make sense,' he thought, 'why not run parallel to the coast, why halve their lead on us?'

Gisco clambered down the rigging to the deck twenty feet below. The instant his feet hit the deck he took stock of his surroundings. The crew were frantically clearing the deck for battle. They were good, he noticed, well drilled and efficient.

He could see the captain on the foredeck, no doubt looking for him.

‘Captain!’ he shouted.

~~The man turned and strode towards him. ‘Yes, Admiral?’~~

‘What do you make of her, Captain?’

‘Roman for sure, probably coastal patrol, maybe thirty crew and a reduced century of marines. She’s fast, doing battle speed now, and she cuts the water well. She’s lighter than one of our own, maybe a couple of knots faster at her top speed.’

Gisco wondered if the captain had noticed their course. ‘Anything else?’ he asked.

‘Yes, she’s commanded by a fool. If he holds his current course he’s giving us an even chance of catching him.’

Gisco turned away from the captain and spied the Roman galley again. She was ahead, about forty degrees off their starboard bow, but instead of running parallel to the *Elissar*’s course and maintaining her lead, she was running on a converging course that would take her across the bow of the *Elissar* at a distance of approximately three hundred yards.

‘Captain, alter your course, two points starboard.’

The captain issued the order to a runner who set off at speed to the helmsman at the stern of the ship. The ship altered course slightly and Gisco nodded with satisfaction when he noted the other two triremes instantly responding to the new heading. He turned again to look ahead. The captain was right on one count – the Roman was a fool; but he was wrong on the other: their odds of catching them were a lot better than evens.

‘Shall I increase to attack speed, Admiral?’

At first Gisco did not hear the question. All his senses focused on the Roman galley, now four hundred yards ahead on his right. ‘He must know he is eating up his advantage with every oar-stroke by now,’ he thought. ‘Where is he running to?’

‘Shall I increase speed?’ the captain asked again.

‘What?’ Gisco answered irritably, his mind replaying the captain’s words that he had heard but not listened to, allowing them to form in his mind.

‘No, maintain course and speed. If we increase, the Roman may alter course and run before us, matching us stroke for stroke. We’ll let him shorten his lead in his own good time. Then we’ll take him.’

Septimus moved towards the foredeck. He had noticed the course correction when they emerged from the fog and had been instantly alarmed. What the hell was Atticus doing? He trusted the captain but their course seemed like madness. Atticus was joined on the foredeck by Lucius, and the two men were deep in conversation. The second-in-command was ten years older than Atticus. He was a small bull of a man, solid and unyielding. A sailor all his life, he too was a native of the Calabrian coast. He was known as a tough disciplinarian, but he was fair, and all the crew, especially Atticus, respected his judgement. As he spoke with the captain, he occasionally pointed ahead to the distant shoreline across the strait.

‘There,’ Septimus could hear him as he approached, ‘about two points off the starboard bow, you can see the breakers now.’

‘Yes, that’s where I thought. Lucius, take command on the steering deck. Have Gaius follow my signals once the Carthaginians fall in behind us. Make sure he doesn’t take his eyes off me. The course corrections need to be immediate.’

‘Yes, Captain,’ Lucius said, and hurried past the approaching centurion.

‘Your men in place, Septimus? Remember, once the Carthaginians get behind us you can expect

some incoming fire from their archers. It's imperative that my helmsman has all his attention on his job, I don't need him worrying about taking an arrow between his shoulder-blades.'

'Yes, they are. But why the course change, Atticus? We're halving our lead.'

Atticus did not immediately answer. He looked back at the approaching galleys, two points on his port stern, a little over three hundred yards behind. Within seconds they would be running dead astern.

'Septimus, we can't simply run, they'll catch us before we breach the mouth of the strait. Our ship can't outrun three.'

'Why the hell not? They're all triremes, surely you could match them stroke for stroke. I've seen how you run your slave deck. Those men are all fit. With your reserve of forty rowers they could maintain battle speed for at least another hour. The Carthaginians would never have closed a gap of five hundred yards before we reached the mouth of the strait.'

Atticus shook his head. 'Think it through. If you were one of three men pursuing another and all were evenly matched in stamina, how would you run your prey down?'

Septimus thought for a moment. He turned to face the three galleys astern. One was in the lead with the other two off its port and starboard stern quarters. They were matching the lead ship stroke for stroke, as if they moved as one. But they're not one, Septimus thought. They're three. The commander of the vanguard did not need to run his ships at the same pace. Even with two galleys they were sufficiently outnumbered the *Aquila* to ensure victory. One ship could be sacrificed.

'We can't outrun them,' Septimus said aloud. 'They'll sacrifice one ship to run us down.'

Atticus nodded, his eyes never leaving the Carthaginian hunters. They were now dead astern. Three hundred yards.

'Septimus, clear the fore. I need line of sight to the aft-deck.'

Septimus hesitated, one question remaining. 'So if we can't outrun them, what's our plan?'

'We need to level the odds,' Atticus replied as he turned his full attention to the course ahead, 'I'm steering the *Aquila* between Scylla and Charybdis, between the rock and the whirlpool.'

'Match course and speed, Captain,' Gisco ordered over his shoulder. He heard the captain repeat the order to a runner, and a moment later the *Elissar* heeled over slightly as she slotted into the wake of the Roman trireme. Gisco could not see the crew of his quarry. The Romans had erected a shield wall along the back of the aft-deck using their *scuta*, the four-foot-high shields of the legions, in a double height formation, ostensibly to protect the sailors on the deck, Gisco surmised. 'That won't protect you for long,' he thought. He turned to the captain, his face a mask of determination.

'It's time to hunt them down, Captain... Signal to the *Sidon* to come alongside.'

Again a runner was dispatched to the aft-deck and the captain watched the *Sidon* break formation and increase speed, moving abreast of the *Elissar*.

The captain turned to Gisco. 'The *Sidon* is in position,' he said, but the admiral was already brushing past him to the side rail.

'Captain of the *Sidon*!' he bellowed across the forty yards separating the two galleys as they sped along, their oars once again matching each other stroke for stroke.

Karalis, the captain, identified himself on the foredeck.

'Captain, increase to attack speed. Maintain for ten minutes and then increase to ramming speed.' Gisco shouted with resolve. 'Push the Romans hard, Captain, whip your own slaves until they drop from exhaustion, spare no man. I want the Roman galley slaves spent. When your rowers collapse we will overtake you and run them down.'

‘Yes, Admiral.’ Karalis saluted and immediately turned to issue orders to the slave deck below.

~~Gisco watched the *Sidon* leap forward, unleashed, as if she had thrown off a dead weight, her speed increasing to ten knots.~~

He turned again to watch the Roman galley, the blood in his veins mixing with adrenaline as he sensed the approach of battle. It was now just a matter of time.

Atticus focused all his attention on the waters ahead, trying to read every nuance in the waves. His concentration was interrupted by the approach of a runner.

‘The second-in-command begs to report, Captain, one of the Carthaginians has broken formation and has moved alongside the lead ship.’

Atticus kept his eyes on the waters ahead. The water was calm, the rock still two thousand yards distant. He had time. His orders to Lucius could not be trusted to a runner, he needed to speak to him in person. He double-checked the waters off the bow again and then turned and ran down the length of the ship to the aft-deck. Lucius was staring through a chink in the shield wall to the galleys behind.

‘Report, Lucius,’ Atticus said.

The second-in-command turned and straightened. ‘Just as we expected, Captain, one of the Carthaginians has broken off and has just increased to attack speed. She’s already closing the gap. The other two have taken up flanking positions on her starboard and port aft-quarters, but they are maintaining battle speed.’

Atticus brushed past Lucius to look through the shield wall to see for himself. The three Carthaginian galleys were in arrow formation as before, but now the lead ship was outpacing the other two.

‘Lucius, let him come to within one hundred yards and then let fly. Attack speed. Match his stroke for stroke. He’s nothing to lose so he’ll push us hard. He’ll keep pace for a few minutes then he’ll push to ramming speed. Hopefully we’ll reach Charybdis before that. When we do I’ll signal for ramming speed, then for the oars. We want him off guard, so keep them close. We can’t allow them time to react.’

Lucius nodded. ‘Understood, Captain, I’ll watch for your signal.’

Atticus reached out and clasped his second-in-command on the shoulder, feeling the calm strength there, trusting him. ‘See you beyond Charybdis,’ he said.

‘Or in Elysium,’ Lucius replied with a smile.

Septimus had watched Atticus outline his orders to Lucius without comment. He did not understand the strategy that Atticus was dictating, although the captain had been right about the Carthaginian tactics. They were sacrificing one ship to wear down the *Aquila*, to leave her helpless, unable to even limp away at standard speed. The captain turned and ran once again to take up position on the foredeck. Lucius returned to looking through the shield wall at the approaching galley, the marines holding the *scuta* in place grimly as arrow after arrow struck their protective wall. Septimus stood beside the second-in-command.

‘Lucius, what are Scylla and Charybdis, the rock and the whirlpool?’

‘Scylla is the rock and Charybdis is the whirlpool,’ Lucius replied, never taking his eyes off the pursuer. ‘The ancients believed that both were once beautiful sea nymphs who displeased the gods and were punished. Scylla was transformed into a rock that reaches out into the sea to claw at passing ships, and Charybdis into a whirlpool that would swallow ships whole as they tried to avoid Scylla.’

Lucius paused, judging the distance before bellowing down to the slave deck, ‘Drum master

Attack speed!’

Septimus could hear the drum master repeat the order to the two hundred sweating slaves as the pace increased perceptibly, the *Aquila* instantly responding. Lucius looked through the shield wall again and grunted his approval before continuing as if he had only paused for breath.

‘Any ship that doesn’t know the strait – and we’re counting on the fact that the Carthaginians don’t – may find herself running along the Sicilian coastline. On this side of the strait you have to run between Scylla and Charybdis, between the rock and the whirlpool.’

Karalis thought for a moment that the Roman ship would not react, perhaps resigned to her fate, perhaps wanting to fight and die with honour rather than run. Maybe he would get the chance to bloody his sword after all. Karalis was Sardinian by birth, as were most of his crew, and although he respected the strength of his country’s Phoenician masters, he despised their condescension. He fully understood the admiral’s strategy, but this did not assuage his anger, as he knew it was because he was Sardinian that his ship had been chosen to be sacrificed. Just as a smile began to creep onto his face as he relished the idea of robbing the Carthaginians of first blood, the Roman craft responded by increasing to attack speed. The captain cursed. The *Sidon* was still one hundred yards short of the Roman ship. He would never catch her now. Even from his initial vantage point at the rear of the vanguard, he could see that the Roman trireme was a faster, sleeker ship than his own. He estimated that she was at least two knots faster, which meant his rowers had to work harder to keep pace. None of that mattered though, he thought. Even the best galley slaves could not maintain attack speed for longer than fifteen minutes. At ramming speed they would collapse after five. The captain would follow orders. He would keep the pace unrelenting. He would push his slaves past exhaustion, past endurance. They would tear the heart out of the Roman galley slaves, and then both ships, Sardinian and Roman, would stop – the Sardinians to rest, the Romans to die.

Atticus wiped the spray from his face as he refocused his eyes on the sea ahead. The *Aquila* was now making eleven knots, her attack speed. He stuck out his right arm, a signal to Gaius to make another minor adjustment to the ship’s course, keeping her just right of Scylla, the rock. Atticus estimated that they had increased speed some ten minutes ago. He knew the measure of his slave crew, knew their worth, and knew that by now they were reaching their limits. Once again he swept the sea before him with his eyes.

‘There!’ he shouted to himself. ‘There she is...dead ahead, eighty yards!’

He quickly turned and looked back the sixty yards to the aft-deck. Lucius was staring directly at him. ‘Now, Lucius!’ he shouted, and pumped his fist in the air, the prearranged signal.

Lucius’s order carried clearly along the length of the ship:

‘Ramming speed!’

Karalis glanced at the two Carthaginian galleys one hundred yards behind him. They were drawing further behind with every stroke the *Sidon* took, although the captain knew that once the Roman vessel was stationary, the Carthaginians would be upon her within a minute. He walked quickly back along the deck to the steps leading down into the slave decks below. The drum master was seated at the foot of the steps, keeping the rhythm a notch above attack speed in order to match the Roman trireme. It had been ten minutes; time to increase to ramming speed. Even though he knew his ship would miss the action of the final kill, he could sense the blood rushing through his veins in anticipation of the final part of the chase. He had never continued on ramming speed past two minutes. Normally the

was all that was required to bring his galley to its top speed of twelve knots, enough speed to drive the bronze ram of the *Sidon* through the heaviest timbers.

‘Drum master, ram—’ His words were cut short by the sight of the Roman trireme increasing her pace to her top speed. He hesitated for a second, perplexed, then gathered his wits: ‘Ramming speed! Drum master, ramming speed!’

Karalis ran to the foredeck to confirm what he saw. At only one hundred yards’ distance the Roman galley filled his field of vision. She was drawing ahead slightly, her faster lines giving her the advantage at top speed. Karalis was dumbstruck. Why by the gods would the Romans increase speed unprovoked? Surely once she went to top speed her rowers would only last mere minutes? The captain of the *Sidon* was still trying to understand the Romans’ lunacy when suddenly, within one stroke, all two hundred oars of the Roman trireme were raised clean out of the water.

At ramming speed the bow of the *Aquila* tore through the water at thirteen knots, the drum master pounding eighty beats a minute, forty strokes for each of the trireme’s two hundred oars. Atticus leaned forward over the bow rail, measuring the distance between the *Aquila* and the rim of the whirlpool ahead. He stuck out his right hand again for a minor course adjustment, the ship responding instantly to Gaius’s expert touch on the tiller sixty yards behind. He dropped his arm and the ship steadied on its final course, one that would take the galley to the very edge of oblivion, the gaping maw of Charybdis. Atticus afforded himself a brief look over his shoulder to the pursuing enemy galley. The shield wall was obscuring his vision; however, he could tell by the line of her oars that she was matching their course adjustments, point for point, wary that her prey might suddenly make a drastic course change in a bid to escape. He turned to the bow again, refocusing all his attention on the point where the *Aquila* would skim the edge of the whirlpool, now forty yards away...now thirty...twenty...

He had to be exact. Too soon and the ship would not have enough momentum for steerage; too late and the starboard rowers would fall victim to the currents of Charybdis.

It was now, the moment was now, the bow of the *Aquila* was ten yards short, Charybdis was upon them. He spun around, looking for Lucius, finding him riveted to his post on the aft-deck. Their eyes locked.

‘Now, Lucius!’ he roared.

Lucius responded, ‘Drum master, raise oars!’

The order was instantly repeated below in the slave decks. The drum beat stopped. The slaves threw themselves forward, pivoting their oars, lifting the blades clear out of the water.

The *Aquila* sped on, at first her speed checking imperceptibly. Atticus sprinted the length of the galley to the aft-deck, barely registering the terrified faces of many of the marines who had never witnessed the fury of Charybdis. To his left the churning waters of the whirlpool were speeding past the *Aquila*, only six feet from the hull, running counter to the direction of the trireme but not hindering her progress.

Gaius stood immovable at the rudder, his gaze steely as he sought to keep the tiller straight along the axis of the ship, the true course of the *Aquila* vital if she was to avoid becoming the victim of her own trap. The captain took up station beside him, his hand resting lightly on the tiller, searching for the telltale tremor that would betray any pressure on the rudder’s blade.

Atticus saw Gaius’s reaction a heartbeat before the minute tremor under his hand confirmed the helmsman’s incredible reflexes and he gripped the tiller tightly. Beneath the *Aquila* an unseen tentacle of current, too weak to attack the seventy-ton hull, was building against the rudder, threatening

force the blade off true. Within seconds the pressure had multiplied tenfold and the muscles in both men's arms were tensed and flexed as they struggled to keep the tiller aligned.

Time slowed as Atticus's mind counted the seconds it would take to sail past the whirlpool. Beside him Gaius's face was mottled from exertion while beneath him speed bled from his galley as the enemy closed in. The sound of Lucius's voice filled the air, sounding the ever-decreasing gap between the two galleys. 'Seventy yards...! Sixty yards!' and all around him the faces of the crew were frantic as they witnessed the struggle of their captain and helmsman. Underneath it all, Atticus felt the rudder shift slightly under his hand and for an instant a panic flared in his heart that he had cut his course too close to the vortex.

Hold your course, Aquila, his mind roared, trying to connect his will to the ship.

Almost within an instant the pressure on the rudder was released, and Atticus knew the *Aquila* was through, the waters around her hull becoming calm once more as the whirlpool fell off her starboard stern quarter. He spun around to his second-in-command.

'Lucius, prepare to get under way. Get below decks, have all the reserves assigned plus any additional crew available. Do whatever's required, but I need attack speed immediately.'

'Yes, Captain,' he replied, and was instantly away.

Atticus moved to the stern rail to watch his pursuers. Now, he grinned with satisfaction, the Carthaginians would feel the wrath of Charybdis.

The *Sidon* cut through the water at twelve knots, closing the gap on the Roman trireme by ten yards every five seconds. Karalis had wavered for an instant, unable to comprehend the Roman captain's actions, before his years of command experience took over. He realized they would be upon the Roman ship within a minute. Karalis shrugged his questions aside and began issuing orders to his assembled crew.

'Prepare for impact! Assemble the boarding party!' They would ram the Roman galley through her stern, a killing blow, taking her rudder and holing her below the waterline. While the Romans were recovering, his boarding party would spill over the stern rail, killing the senior officers who would be stationed there. He would lead his men personally, they would spare no one, and when his ship finally disengaged, tearing her bronze ram from the hull, the Roman trireme would drag her chained slaves beneath the waves.

The gap was down to fifty yards when the Roman vessel re-engaged her oars. You're too late, fool, the captain thought. The *Sidon* was at the point where the Roman crew had inexplicably raised her oars. He would be upon them within fifteen seconds.

On the slave deck of the *Sidon*, the galley slaves were oblivious to the action above deck. Chained to his oar, each of the two hundred men was enclosed within his own private hell. For many of them, years at the oar had brutalized them and they worked in silence, their whole world focused on the constant rhythm of their oar-stroke, the backbreaking pull, the quick release to bring the oar forward, a second's respite, the muscles straining again through the next pull. Sweat poured to mingle with fresh blood raised by the taskmaster's lash across their backs, as man after man collapsed from exhaustion, to be savagely beaten where he fell as a reserve took his place, the unrelenting pace never abating.

The thirty rowers of the starboard fore section of the *Sidon* were the first to strike Charybdis. Not six feet from where they stood, on the other side of the hull, the current of the whirlpool sped past them at twenty knots. Keeping to the beat of the drum master, the rowers brought their oars forward and stuck their blades into the water in unison. Instantly the oars were ripped from their fingers as the

current took hold of the blades and pushed the oars parallel to the hull. The slaves on the lower two rows screamed in agony as the oars of the upper row, fifteen foot long and fifty pounds in weight, spun on their mountings and slammed into them, killing many instantly. Within the instant marked by the drum master's beat, the second section of thirty rowers endured the same fate, fuelling the destruction of the slave deck. The starboard side was in chaos, a mayhem of broken men. The port side never missed a beat, the rowers continuing at full tilt, completing the trap.

The air around Karalis was split by the sound of shattering timbers and cries of pain from the slave decks below him, and the *Sidon* heeled violently as momentum was lost on the starboard side. He ran to the starboard rail in time to see the second section of oars collapse against the hull, the deck again ripped by the sound of his ship and her rowers being destroyed beneath him.

'By the gods,' he whispered as he saw the cause, fear coursing through him.

The ship heeled further to the right as the left-side oars continued their stroke, pushing the bronze ram into the current of the whirlpool. The *Sidon* was gripped as if by the hands of a god and whipped around to starboard, throwing Karalis and those around him to the deck. The archers stationed on the foredeck were thrown into the maelstrom of the whirlpool, their cries cut off as they were sucked beneath the tortured waters.

Karalis looked frantically towards the aft-deck, praying for respite but finding none. The helmsman was dead, his chest staved in where the tiller had struck him a killing blow. The *Sidon* was out of control.

'You men, to my aid!' Karalis shouted to three sailors who were lying on the deck around him, realizing that, if he did not check the *Sidon's* momentum once she cleared the current, the galley would spin her stern into the whirlpool and the ship would be lost.

The sailors were dumbstruck, petrified, unable to comprehend the forces attacking their ship.

'Now!' Karalis bellowed. 'Before I cast you overboard to the monster beneath us!'

They were instantly on their feet, their fear of the captain and his threats overcoming their terror and confusion. The men followed the captain to the aft-deck, the violently spinning ship causing one to lose his balance and fall over the side rail.

The force of the turning ship was pressing the rudder hard against the bulkhead, as if it were nailed to the very timbers of the ship. The three men took hold of the six-foot-long tiller and, with all their strength, attempted to heave the rudder back to true. The resistance was incredible, the twenty-knot current gripping the bow of the *Sidon*, causing water to rush past the stern, engulfing the blade of the rudder, transferring its energy up the shaft to fight the strength of the three men. The resistance lessened as the bow cleared the whirlpool and, although Karalis and his men fought hard to bring the rudder to true, he knew the fight was hopeless, the momentum of the eighty-ton galley too great. With his fears echoed in the cries of his men, Karalis felt the whirlpool grip the stern of his ship, sucking the vessel deeper into the maelstrom, dooming all on board.

At only sixty yards' distance, Atticus could hear the screams of the slaves and the snapping of the oars as Charybdis took hold of his enemy. Within seconds the galley had swung her bow into the vortex, which spun the enemy ship until her stern was facing the *Aquila*. Atticus watched in dread and fascination as a group of men fought the tiller of the enemy vessel, their forlorn efforts overcome by the power of the whirlpool, the Carthaginian galley inexorably drawn into Charybdis as the current took a firm grip of her stern, dragging the ship ever closer to the centre of the vortex. The cries of terror were beyond any that Atticus had ever heard.

'Septimus!' Atticus called.

The centurion approached. He was shaking his head in amazement. ‘By the gods, Atticus, I have never seen such a sight. What might does this sea have, that it can take a ship and devour her?’—

‘Charybdis has taken one for us,’ Atticus began, ‘the Carthaginian on the lead ship’s starboard flank is heading directly for the whirlpool. They’ll realize the danger so they’ll either break off the pursuit or try to navigate around. Either way they’re no longer a threat. We’re still too far from the mouth of the strait to escape the last ship. She’ll run us down, knowing that the rest of the fleet are now far behind. Our only chance is to attack and disable her and then disengage before reinforcements arrive. Once we clear the mouth of the strait we’ll raise sail, using the trade winds sweeping south along the Tyrrhenian Sea. The *Aquila* can outsail any Carthaginian trireme.’

Septimus nodded, agreeing with the captain’s logic. He looked back over the stern rail again at the two remaining Carthaginian galleys, picking out the one they would need to attack. Atticus had levelled the odds. Now it was the turn of Septimus and his men to take the fight to the enemy.

On the foredeck of the *Elissar*, Gisco watched the scene before him with mounting disbelief. He couldn’t accurately judge the distance between the *Sidon* and the Roman galley from his position on the portside aft-quarter of the chase, but he knew it had to be close. The oars of the Roman galley had been suddenly raised from the water and before Gisco could question the action they had re-engaged and were once again moving as if nothing had occurred. Then, without warning, the *Sidon* seemed to buckle and swing wildly to starboard. Even now she continued to spin at incredible speed, her hull breaking up under the intolerable stress. Gisco was staggered by what he saw.

‘What sorcery is this?’ the captain beside Gisco muttered aloud. ‘It is the work of Pluto. We must abandon the chase.’

‘No!’ Gisco bellowed, the captain’s words allowing him to give vent to his frustration and fear at what he had just witnessed. ‘There will be no withdrawal. Give me attack speed now and signal to the *Hermes* to continue the pursuit.’

‘Yes, Admiral,’ the captain blurted, caught between his fear of the man before him and the unknown forces attacking the *Sidon*.

Gisco now fully understood the actions of the Roman trireme, from her erratic and seemingly suicidal course to her inexplicably raising oars, and the thought of how they had played him for a fool fuelled the anger within him. Armed with the knowledge that the Roman ship had passed through these waters at attack speed, he gambled that the way ahead was clear, driven now by a desire for revenge.

Captain Maghreb had watched the fate of the *Sidon* with equal horror from the aft-deck of the *Hermes*. The doomed galley was one hundred yards ahead, the sound of snapping timbers as the hull disintegrated mixed with the last cries of her crew as they were consumed.

‘All stop!’ Maghreb roared, his own fear consuming him. The oars of the *Hermes* were raised, the galley instantly losing momentum. Maghreb looked across to the *Elissar*, expecting to see her oars similarly raised. He could only stare in disbelief as the order to continue the pursuit was signalled from the admiral.

‘Steerage speed, lookouts to the foredeck!’ Maghreb roared as he immediately tore his eyes from the *Elissar* to scan the waters ahead, expecting any moment to see the vortex that would engulf his ship. The galley slowed to two knots, steerage speed, feeling her way through the water as she edged forward, searching for the rim of the maelstrom. Maghreb could only hope that the *Hermes* could navigate around the whirlpool in time to join the *Elissar* in full pursuit.

~~'Come about,' Atticus ordered, his gaze steady on the approaching Carthaginian galley, her partner now trying to manoeuvre around Charybdis.~~

'Be ready, Gaius,' Atticus added, 'she'll try to manoeuvre to ram. That's where her strength lies and our weakness.'

Gaius nodded, his entire being focused on the enemy galley. The Carthaginian vessel turned three points to starboard in an effort to run diagonally across the *Aquila's* bow. Gaius knew that the enemy would try to turn tightly to come at them from the beam, to ram them amidships. He turned the *Aquila* three points to port to counter the enemy's move, keeping the bows of both galleys on an intersecting course.

Septimus had assembled his marines on the main deck, preparing the boarding parties that would sweep over the rails of the *Aquila* onto the Carthaginian galley. They had separated into two groups. The first group of twenty *hastati* and twenty *principes*, new recruits coupled with seasoned soldiers, were moving to station themselves on the foredeck. The second group, the older *triarii*, were ranged across the main deck, ready to counter any boarding party from the enemy ship. All had discarded their four-foot-long *scutum* shields for a *hoplon*. The lighter rounded shield was a Greek design, perfectly adapted to the speed and agility needed for boarding, and the marines had trained hard to overcome their past allegiance to the legions' standard shield.

'Steady men,' Septimus said, sensing the aggression coupled with nervous tension in the soldiers assembled at his back. The enemy galley was only one hundred yards away and closing fast.

The *Elissar* tore through the waves at eleven knots, every turn of her bow matched and countered by the approaching Roman galley. Gisco had not anticipated the Romans would turn into the fight so soon, expecting his prey to continue their headlong rush for the mouth of the strait in a vain hope of making their escape. The reversal brought instant, instinctive commands as the galley was prepared for immediate battle. The helmsman worked hard to manoeuvre the *Elissar* into a ramming position, but his skills were evenly matched by those of the Roman helmsman. The Roman galley was now fifty yards away, her bow pointed directly at the *Elissar's*. There would be no opportunity to ram. As the bows connected they would be made fast by both crews, each looking to board the other.

Gisco turned from the approaching galley to look out over the stern rail. The *Hermes* was skirting the northern rim of the whirlpool, her tentative steps enraging the admiral. He had ordered the galley to join him in the pursuit, their combined strength initially needed to ensure the Romans would not escape. Now the *Elissar* would face the Romans alone and Gisco could not suppress the blood lust rising within him, the chance to gain some revenge for the loss of one of his galleys. Further behind the Carthaginian fleet was advancing at battle speed. Once the two galleys engaged, Gisco estimated the fleet would be upon them within fifteen minutes.

Gisco left the aft-deck and strode determinately to the foredeck, leaving the helm in the charge of the captain. The admiral would command the boarding party himself, standing firmly in the front line. Gisco tightened his grip on the hilt of his sword, feeling the unyielding iron in his hand. He drew his weapon in one sudden release, the blade singing against the scabbard.

'Prepare for impact. Make ready to board!'

His men roared with naked aggression. Gisco let them roar, let them fill their hearts and nerves with anger, a rage that he would throw against the Romans.

'Prepare to release!' Septimus ordered, and his twenty *hastati* hoisted their *pila*, their heavy javelins.

up to shoulder height.

Gaius made one final adjustment to the rudder as the two galleys converged at attack speed. He gripped the worn timber of the tiller firmly in his hands as he held the course true, bracing his legs to cope with the anticipated command. The galleys were now only ten yards apart.

‘Loose!’ Septimus roared.

At almost point-blank range, all twenty *hastati* shot their *pila* into the massed ranks of Carthaginians on the foredeck of the *Elissar*. Each spear was eight feet long, with an iron shank that gave the weapon a fearsome penetrating power. As each spear struck its target, its shank broke off from the handle, rendering the weapon useless. The unexpected volley of javelins wrought tremendous carnage amongst the Carthaginians, breaking up the enemy formation that was poised to board the *Aquila*.

‘Starboard side, withdraw!’ Atticus roared, before taking off in a run towards the foredeck.

The order carried clearly to the slave deck and the drum master repeated the order to the starboard-side rowers. The slaves immediately stopped their stroke and pulled the oars in hand over hand. Within an instant the oars were withdrawn, with only their two-foot-long blades exposed outside the hull.

Gaius leaned the rudder slightly over to converge the two ships and the cutwater of the *Aquila*’s prow tore into the extended starboard-side oars of the *Elissar*. The rowers of the *Elissar* were thrown from their positions like rag dolls as the fifteen-foot oars they manned were struck with the force of the seventy-ton Roman trireme travelling at eleven knots. Many of the oars splintered, while some held together to strike the slave at the handle end of the oar. In the confined space of the slave deck, with the men chained to their positions, there was nowhere to run to, and by the time the *Aquila* had run the length of the *Elissar*, the starboard-side slave deck of the Carthaginian galley was strewn with broken bodies.

‘Grappling hooks!’ Septimus ordered as the *Aquila*’s foredeck came in line with the enemy’s aft. Immediately three of his men threw the four-pronged hooks across the narrow gap between the galleys. As the hooks found purchase on the *Elissar*’s deck, the marines clambered to grab hold of the attached ropes and pull with all their might. The gap was closed to less than six feet. Septimus ran forward and jumped on the starboard rail, balancing easily with his *gladius* in one hand and round *hoplon* shield in the other.

‘Men of the *Aquila*, to me,’ he shouted, and jumped the gaping void beneath the two galleys, landing solidly on the aft-deck of the Carthaginian ship.

The marines roared as the blood lust of battle overwhelmed them and they followed the centurion without hesitation over the rails of the enemy ship, clamouring to be the first to draw Carthaginian blood. Septimus barged straight at the man nearest him and struck him squarely with his shield, using his momentum to knock the man off his feet, sending him reeling into someone behind. The few Carthaginians remaining on the aft-deck fled before the charge. Behind the marines, Atticus and Lucius jumped onto the deck of the Carthaginian galley, axes in their hands. Their task would take only minutes, time Septimus and his men would have to buy with their blood.

The war cries of the marines spilling over the rail of the *Elissar* fuelled the frustration within Gisco at the sudden reversal. The air around him was filled with the screams of injured and dying men which, beneath his feet, the deck still reeled from the impact of the Roman trireme’s run against the starboard-side oars of his galley. The ranks of his men had disintegrated under the hammer blows of the *pila* volley, and they were in chaos, with neither focus nor formation.

‘Men of the *Elissar* to me!’ Gisco bellowed as he charged from the foredeck. The veteran soldiers reacted more swiftly than the untested, and so the line of attack was ragged and uncoordinated, but their ferocity bore them on in a headlong rush along the length of the *Elissar*. They struck the line of Romans at full tilt, their momentum checked within a stride by the near-solid wall of shields.

Gisco sidestepped a thrust from a Roman marine before countering the stroke with a slash to the Roman’s thigh. The man yelled in pain as the sword bit deeply into the flesh, but before the admiral could deliver the killing blow his sword was stayed by another Roman, who followed the parry with a vicious attack. Gisco immediately realized that although each of the Romans fought as one man, they also fought as a team, overlapping their attacks, their coordination sapping the strength of the Carthaginians’ original charge. Gisco renewed the surge of the counterattack, urging his men on through the ferocity of his own charge. The *Elissar* would not fall easily.

The Carthaginian war cries reached a new high as another lunge was made in an effort to break the Roman line of battle. The sound spurred on Atticus and Lucius and sweat streamed from their bodies as they redoubled their efforts to sever the tiller from the rudder. The weathered toughened timber was as hard as iron, but with each axe blow small chips flew away and already they were halfway through the four-inch-diameter section.

On the main deck, Septimus saw a breach developing and immediately fed his best fighters into the gap. Within the space of two vicious minutes the gap was sealed once more and the tide of Carthaginians checked. The last of the reserves were now engaged. The next breach could not be held. If the Carthaginians broke through, the fight would become chaotic and all chance of a withdrawal would be lost.

The tiller finally parted under the blows of Atticus and Lucius. Now, even if the Carthaginian galley managed to get back under way, the loss of her rudder would render her useless.

‘Septimus!’ Atticus roared. ‘Withdraw!’

Septimus heard the signal. ‘Fighting withdrawal!’ he roared, his men instantly stepping back towards the aft-deck.

The sudden break-off in resistance threw the Carthaginian attack and a gap opened between the lines.

The twenty *triarii* who had remained on the *Aquila* now loosed volleys of spears into the flank of the Carthaginian forces, checking their advance, allowing the marines vital seconds to mount the aft-deck rails and recross onto the *Aquila*. Within moments the bulk of the marines were aboard, with just a small knot remaining, Septimus amongst them. Under an almost constant volley of spears, the Carthaginians reared up in attack again, their centre driven by a demonic commander, rage emanating from his frame as he tried to cut off the remaining marines. The lines of the grappling hooks were severed as Septimus jumped across the opening gap, the last man to do so.

Gisco could only look on in futile rage as the Roman galley re-engaged her oars, hastening her escape. The Carthaginian fleet was still two thousand yards away, too far behind to stop the Romans reaching the mouth of the strait. All around him his men stood at the side rail of the aft-deck, shouting defiance and insults of cowardice at the Romans. Gisco remained silent, his eyes searching the rails of the enemy ship. The two men he sought were on the foredeck, standing side by side, the taller man, the marine centurion, recognizable from the fight. They were the commanders and he instantly saw they were watching him intently. Gisco burned the images of their faces into his mind. As the gap opened to one hundred yards the Roman galley began to come about to resume her course northwards.

'*Aquila*,' Gisco read on the stern of the galley.

~~Gisco made a silent promise to the gods that one day he would hunt down that ship and have his revenge on all who sailed on her.~~

CHAPTER TWO

The sail billowed out with a crack as the trailing wind filled the broad canvas sheet, the running rigging straining against the pull. Within an instant the *Aquila* was propelled to fifteen knots, its cutwater tearing through the sea, throwing a spray of water across the foredeck. The running of a galley required immense skill and concentration, and Atticus noticed the iron look on Gaius's face as he fought to keep the helm true. One slip and the galley's stern would swing through the line of the wind. The sail would be exposed to unequal stresses, instantly snapping the rigging and collapsing the canvas. Worse still, if the rigging held, the galley would capsize under the press of wind.

Atticus watched in silence as the experienced helmsman struck a delicate balance between the prevailing wind and the ship, making the two connect until the galley perfectly matched the wind's speed and direction. Confident that Gaius had the ship in hand, Atticus looked out over the stern rail to confirm the Carthaginians were not in pursuit. The *Aquila* was now four hundred yards clear of the headland at the northeastern tip of Sicily. The Punici had not followed beyond the strait.

Atticus was in turmoil as he realized his ship had escaped. Although he had known the only choice had been to flee from the enemy fleet, the retreat from the Carthaginian galley marked the first time in his whole life that he had run from an enemy. The empty sea behind the *Aquila* mocked the captain for its absence of an enemy and Atticus slammed his fist onto the stern rail. Knowing he had made the right decision was not enough to assuage the dishonour he felt at having fled.

Septimus stood silently by Atticus's side. Eight marines were unaccounted for from the fight on board the enemy galley, six of them *hastati*, junior soldiers, many of them in their first battle. He could only pray that all had died under the sword and that none had been left injured on the enemy deck. If taken alive their fate would be horrific. The *Aquila* had been saved because of the sacrifice of those men. Septimus recounted their names silently in his mind.

'Where are we sailing to?' he asked finally.

'To the only port Rome holds on the north coast. To Brolium.'

Septimus nodded, looking ahead over the bow. During his time on the *Aquila* he had come to accept that the unfamiliar seas around him held many enemies, as had the unfamiliar terrain of Sicily when he had served in the legions. As a legionary he was always confident that he served in the best land army in the world. The sight of the Carthaginian fleet had made him realize that Rome did not enjoy that same superiority and confidence at sea.

Eight hours later the *Aquila* rounded the eastern headland guarding the approaches to the Roman-held port of Brolium. Atticus stood alone on the bow, preferring solitude as the hours had sped past and a league after league fell under the galley's wake. His thoughts had ranged over every detail of the Carthaginian ships they had fought, every difference, however minute, between them and the vessels under his feet, his mind slowly forming a model of the heavier, stronger galleys that would soon plague the waters off northern Sicily.

A sudden change in the tilt of the deck broke Atticus's thoughts as Gaius lined up the *Aquila* to strike the very centre of the hectic waters ahead, crammed with transport barges awaiting a chance to discharge their contents onto the already crowded docks of the once-quiet fishing town. Even from the distance out, the air around Atticus was filled with the hum of voices from the multitude at work

broken occasionally by the sound of a whip crack as a driver spurred his team of oxen to advance, signalling the departure of yet another fully loaded wagon along the road south to the fortified legionary encampment hidden beyond the town.

The scene of docking and departing barges, of unloading and reloading supplies, of man and beast struggling for space on the congested docks seemed completely chaotic, and yet Atticus could sense the underlying order that permeated the entire operation as no voice was raised in anger and everywhere men moved with purpose and intent. The Roman legions had never fought a campaign on the mainland before Sicily, and yet, within a matter of months, the Romans' ability to bring order and discipline to all endeavours ensured that the legions were operating as if they were but a mile from the city of Rome itself. Atticus could only wonder if any natural barrier would ever exist that could protect a people against the seemingly relentless advance of Rome.

Lucius's sharp commands cut through the cacophony as the sail was collapsed and made secure and the oars were engaged in the rapidly dwindling sea room of the inner harbour. Again Gaius's incredible skill was called upon as barge after barge was avoided, their crews shouting warnings and curses as each near collision with the slow, ponderous vessels was averted. Atticus's gaze swept the dock, searching for an opportunity. He quickly saw one and calculated the angles. It would be tight.

'Three points starboard!' he roared, his voice acknowledged by Gaius sixty yards away with a nod and a nimble touch on the tiller as Atticus ran to the main deck to prepare to disembark.

The *Aquila* aligned her bow with an emerging gap as a barge began to cast off, her now empty hull turning towards the mid-channel. Voices and hands were raised on the docks, calling forward the next waiting barge into the valuable space before one of the taskmasters noticed the *Aquila*'s interference, his realization causing a minor panic as the galley's unerring intent became apparent. Lucius roared for the barge to give way, his command instinctively followed by the merchantmen of the transport vessel who feared the *Aquila*'s four-foot bronze ram, and the galley swung deftly into the gap left by the departing barge.

Atticus, Septimus and a detachment of six legionaries ran down the gangway the moment they touched the dock, their determined arrival forestalling any protest from the irate taskmaster.

'Stand by on station,' Atticus called to Lucius, who saluted and immediately ordered the gangway raised and the galley to push off from the dock. The six legionaries fell in pairs behind the captain and centurion and together they marched towards the end of the dock, heading to the town beyond. The slave labourers crowding the wharf moved back to allow the armed men to pass; as a knot of them dispersed, Atticus spotted an officer approaching at the head of a *contubernia* of ten soldiers. He was a tall, gaunt man, determination in his step, his face a mask of fury. Atticus recognized him immediately. He was Aulus, the Brolium harbour master.

'Who the hell do you think you are?' Aulus yelled as he moved around the gangway of a unloading barge, shoving his way through the queue of bearers that cut across his path. He checked his step as he recognized the approaching captain, ordering his squad of ten men to halt.

'Atticus, you Greek dog!' he smiled. 'By Jupiter's balls! What madness is this?'

The two men shook hands, Roman style, each grasping the other's arm below the elbow.

'I should have known it was the *Aquila*; only Gaius could pull off a manoeuvre like that. Arrived, Septimus,' Aulus exclaimed over the captain's shoulder, 'still alive, I see.'

Septimus allowed himself a smile at the friendly gibe, knowing Aulus's dislike of legionaries.

'We couldn't wait for clearance, Aulus. We need to see the port commander immediately.'

Aulus was disturbed by the captain's infectious agitation, something he had never before seen in the young man.

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