

**Islands of Sybota – Gerastios/March
Eponymous Year of Daiochos – 433 BC**

The noises from the men faded behind him as he left the camp, picking his way along the rocks with nothing but the moon to light his way, the wind blustered in his face, cold and odorless like winter wind.

Diotimos saw Lakedaimonios and Proteas up ahead, way ahead, Proteas was unmistakable from his tall broad frame carved in blackest silhouette next to Lakedaimonios, who was a shorter, more slender man. They were facing the darkness beyond the rocky precipice at whose edge the two men stood in complete defiance of chance and mishap, like a couple of boys playing chicken, building up the courage to be the first to leap, their cloaks puffing out in the wind blowing in off the sea.

These islands are small, remote and barren rocks that hump stubbornly from the sea like the knuckles of some titan's hand clinging to the seabed. Untamed by man, windswept and easy to miss if you were sailing passed.

Not even Proteas could have known that around these insignificant lumps of rock nobody ever heard of before, would come one of the most significant moments in all of history. And soon, everyone will have heard of the islets of Sybota.

He could probably count the number of people who ever set foot on these rocks in the past thousand years on a single hand, and the wind howled a screeched like lamenting Sirens through the crags and peaks.

The Corcyraean fleet, which consisted of a hundred and ten warships practically surrounded the tiny islets, where their crews and officers had put ashore for the night, and dismantled the masts, bringing them ashore with everything other than what was essential, readying their vessels for battle. Speed would be the essence tomorrow, speed and agility, for they knew that, while they were making their preparations, the Corinthians were also busily making theirs on some other nameless beach or cove along the Peloponnesian coast.

Proteas stared at the dim glow of their campfires glimmering out from the other islands in the blackness like stars glinting in the night sky. Their ships sat dark as Hadean shadows upon the water.

The Athenians had landed on the largest islet with the Corcyraean commanders Miciades, Aisimides and Eurybatos, who made the island their base of operations.

'... We'll take position off their right flank,' said Lakedaimonios.

Proteas nodded without speaking.

'When the battle begins, we may have to draw back.'

Proteas heard someone coming up the sloping granite behind them. He glanced over his shoulder. 'Have a care. It's slippery,' he said.

Lakedaimonios looked round, then seeing it was Diotimos, he turned back to face the wind.

Diotimos came to Lakedaimonios' side, stepping carefully to the edge, he looked down warily into the chilling blackness below. 'The Corcyraeans are unhappy about our orders.'

'Of course they are,' said Lakedaimonios.

'I'm confused about them myself, Proteas,' Diotimos said.

Proteas looked at him.

'They're simple enough,' said Lakedaimonios. 'We do not engage in this battle. Only if the Corinthians press on to Corcyra and attempt to land there are we to engage them. Meanwhile we keep our distance and observe only.'

Diotimos was dumbfounded. 'Our spies tell us they've got a fleet of over a hundred and fifty ships. Xenoklides is their most capable navarch. It could be a close thing. What if the enemy overwhelms Miciades's fleet? Are we still to hold back? Watch like impotent eunuchs while our new ally is annihilated?'

'We have our orders,' Proteas finally said, his voice deep and clearly unhappy with their orders.

'Mad orders,' Diotimos responded. 'To what purpose other than war do we find ourselves here, liveried and prepared for battle? Are we to be spectators at an event. Better if Pericles had sent a few fishing ships to watch instead,' he ranted bitterly, his blood hot for battle, his ambitions poised for heroism and glory. 'Enough politics. Let's just get on with it, that's what I say.' He looked carefully at Lakedaimonios. 'Why delay what cannot be stopped? We and Corinth have been on this course for years, let's not turn away from it now, when we have this opportunity to destroy the best of their power. Of Megara's fleet too. Does Pericles fear what the Spartans might do? I can tell you both what they'll do...' (Proteas and Lakedaimonios looked at him, seeing his rage and hatred almost bubbling to the surface). 'Nothing. They'll do nothing. They can't afford it. The last war practically broke them. And they can't afford risking another helot uprising. And if the Corinthian and Megarian fleets are destroyed, then they'll be as weak as fleas at sea, our colonies and allies beyond their reach. And their king has no appetite for another war with us. He has an empty throne beside him. And he's an old man. Too old to lead armies into battle. The boy regent Pausanias is too young. No, they're in no shape for war at all. So if this is what lies behind this unreasonable order, then it's all for nothing but a child's fear of the monster in the dark.'

Neither Lakedaimonios and Proteas spoke. They merely stared emotionlessly at him for an endless moment. Then:

'You underestimate the Lakedaimonians, Diotimos,' said Lakedaimonios. and then he turned back to look out to sea.

Diotimos took a deep breath, filling his lungs. 'Pericles should heed that saying the Spartans have...'

Lakedaimonios raised a brow.

'*Fear will wither you,*' Diotimos said unapologetically.

Lakedaimonios glared at him.

The trireme is a magnificent vessel of war that is unmatched by any other; it is swift to action and highly maneuverable, responds instantly to the pedalia, (steering oars), as it does the propulsion oars. Well managed, it is a deadly wolf of the sea.

The trireme is one-hundred-and-twenty-one feet long stem to stern, and eighteen feet in the beam. Slender and fearsome, she is a sophisticated engine of death. Her long cramped rowing decks are low, narrow and brutally hot, and the burly oarsman is cramped into a space of exactly two cubits.¹ In this space, naked but for his loincloth, he commands his oar, which is thirteen feet long, with practiced precision. For that, he is paid one drachma a day.

¹ *Three feet nine inches.*

There are one hundred and seventy oarsmen aboard the war trireme, divided along three decks, with sixty-two men along the top deck, sixty-two more along the middle deck and fifty-four men on the lower deck, upon whom the sweat of the men above rains down, hot and salty.

Like soldiers marching, they row their oars as one to the tune played by the trièraulès, who plays his flute to a rhythm, slow, moderate or fast, to which the oarsmen dip and draw their oars as one.

Masts and sails can be removed quickly, and, when possible, put ashore, rendering the vessel lighter. She can maneuver swiftly and dexterously through the water, and her ramming horn is cast from solid bronze and can rip a broad hole in an enemy ship and send it quickly into the silent depths.

Battles are won and lost, not on the size of a fleet, but upon the tactical skills of the trierarch and his crew's ability to fulfill them. When and where these necessities are unified, the trireme is the deadliest weapon of war ever devised by the human mind.

The fleet rowed quietly away from the shore, like a giant bask of crocodiles slipping silently into the pre-dawn calm. They left their masts and unnecessary equipment stowed on the beach under the watch of a hundred hoplites, to await their return or news of their destruction. Nobody was in a mood for mercy today.

Prayers, sacrifices and libations were given to Poseidon and Nike, and to Ares, lord of war, and to Pegasus, the sacred emblem of Corinth. But deep down, Xenoklides knew that victory only favors the better navarch, and today, he needed to be the best navarch on the seas.

Waves slapped and sloshed against the prow as they cut a northwesterly course, following the rugged coastline towards the dark rocky Islets of Sybota rising in the west. He wanted to come in behind them, before steering west to meet the enemy fleet.

There was an uncanny silence, just the low slow tune of the trièraulès flute rising from the bowels joined by the melodious swishing of oars drawing slowly through the water.

The navarch was liveried in his black leather skinned torso cuirass, his back draped by a long blue cloak that fluttered in the wind as he stood out on the prow, his dark leathery face drawn tight as he gazed seaward, watching the impressive fleet of Corcyraean warships stretched along the horizon like a wooden reef half a parasang away, divided into packs across the calm dark water west of the islets. The enemy had also removed their masts and unnecessary weight in readiness for battle.

Xenoklides removed his cloak ready for battle and handed it to his servant by his side.

Arrabaios and Niarkhos marched up behind him.

'The spotters count one hundred and fifty-two enemy ships, Navarch,' said Arrabaios.

Xenoklides' right hand rested on the carved bone hilt of his sword as he turned to his fresh-faced young officers, one of them his own son.

'It is confirmed. Ten of them are Athenian, sir.' Niarkhos looked almost pleased. 'They're holding back like nervous virgins.'

Arrabaios laughed.

'False courage is the last sanctuary of coward's and fools, gentlemen,' said Xenoklides as he lowered his eyes thoughtfully to the deck, his hands behind his

back. 'I know you to be neither of these things. So keep your mirth until victory is ours, and tempt not the gods to their displeasure.' He gazed sternly into their eyes. 'The reason they're holding back is because they're probably under orders not to engage us. So pass the order to the fleet that they are to avoid engagement with the Athenian ships unless they first attack us.' His eyes sharpened on the young men.

'Sir. They're warships. Their being here constitutes a hostile act.'

'An act of war, sir,' said Arrabaios.

Xenoklides shot Arrabaios an angry look. 'Then you will explain how Corinth started a war with the Delians to the oligarchs and the Spartans! See if they agree with you.'

Arrabaios' face darkened with a flush of blood.

'Now carry out my orders, or get off my ship!'

Arrabaios gave the sea a chilled look. He stiffened, his face downcast from the navarch's scolding.

Xenoklides looked up and watched the seagulls ranging over the cliffs along the Peloponnesian coast. 'There will be no provocation against the Athenians on our part. Any commander who disobeys this command will be executed along with his crew, be them Corinthian or Megarian or Ambraciot.' He was looking at Arrabaios. 'Order the squadrons to take up their positions and to hold in readiness to engage the enemy.' He turned back to the sea scanning the line of enemy warships before them, looking for weaknesses and tactical advantages. 'We'll proceed as planned with the diekplous tactic, the breakthrough tactic. We'll take the lead position.'

Arrabaios turned and loped away to relay the orders.

The ships in his fleet were signaled and they responded quickly. The fifty fastest ships maneuvered into ten forward squadrons of five.

'It's going to be a busy day, Niarkhos,' he said quietly in a tone that invoked more affection than command. 'Are you ready to do your duty, my boy?' He looked at the inexperienced youth. There was fear and uncertainty in the lad's eyes.

Niarkhos nodded. 'Yes, papa.'

Xenoklides nodded. 'Just stay close by me, lad, do as I tell you and you'll be fine.'

Niarkhos nodded, but there was still uncertainty in him, chipping away at his nerve. 'What if the Athenians attack, papa?'

Xenoklides put his hand on Niarkhos' upper arm and gave it a reassuring squeeze. 'If they do, we'll sink them.' He gave him a wan smile.

'That will draw Sparta into war.'

Xenoklides nodded. 'Yes, lad. It will.'

Arrabaios returned and Xenoklides, now Niarkhos' commander again, turned back and watched the enemy fleet rowing slowly into the brightening dawn, moving into their positions.

Niarkhos watched his father, calm and calculating, scanning the enemy for weaknesses. Processing and revising his tactics. He hadn't expected Athenians, nor had he expected such a large fleet. The Corcyraeans were putting everything they had into the effort. The entire fleet, which meant Corcyra must have been left undefended. If he could destroy them and put enough of their ships out of action, they could make fast oars to Corcyra and make an amphibious landing. Resistance would be minimal.

They would move in fast, he thought. Get in amongst them, scatter them, disable them and drive them onto the rocks or out into the open sea, *then we'll drown the bastards*, he heard his inner voice say.

The mighty Corinthian-Megarian-Ambracian fleets, totally a hundred and fifty warships moved into a long line of three fifty ship squadrons, rowing diagonally towards the enemy at a steady speed, the monotonous tune of flutes drifted up from their sultry decks and carried up like a lament. The squadrons of the fleet kept pace, the oars of their ships rising and dipping into the sea at precisely the same time, maintaining the same momentum and course to the same cruel music.

In their positions, a strange stillness hung over the fleets as they sat motionless like sharks basking, facing one another, the sea around them glinting and twinkling with amber flares in the dawn light. The chilly breath of Boreas, god of the north wind, blew in Xenoklides' face, through his grizzled beard. His nostrils flared and filled with the smell of the sea, soon the air would stink of blood and fear.

There was no sound but the distant screeching of gulls and the slap of the wavelets against the hull. The tension was palpable, his officers stood ready for their orders, the fleet was poised for battle.

Xenoklides studied the enemy one last time, laying four stadia in front of him. Finally he turned to Arrabaios and Niarkhos. 'My helmet.'

Niarkhos took his father's heavy, white crested bronze helmet from a sailor and turned to Xenoklides and held it out to him.

'Give the command,' he said as took his helmet with both hands and pulled it onto his head. He looked at Arrabaios. 'Attack speed.'

Arrabaios turned and yelled back, '*Attack! ... speed!!!*'

'Attack Speed!' Several shouts rallied up from the rowing decks below and the rowers ran out their oars, which gave the signal to the rest of the fleet, and their oars slipped out through their ports like unfurling wings and dipped into the sea. A horn blasted a signal to the other ships in three long deep blasts, and like echoes, other horns in the fleet relayed the command. The trièraulès' flutes started playing once again, a moderate speed now and the unfurled wings began to sweep through the water. As momentum was established, the flutes played an ever faster song, and the oars rose and fell with staggering quickness – Whoosh! ... Whoosh! ... Whoosh...! Like seaborne arrows, the combined fleets of Corinth, Megara and Ambracia accelerated and flew nimbly across the water, steadily towards the enemy.

Niarkhos' eyes twitched nervously towards the enemy looming with the promise of death beyond the prow – getting closer. He stood in dumb silence waiting for the inevitable.

The ten Athenian triremes, apparently as mindful of the Thirty Years Peace as Xenoklides was, kept their ships to the right flank at a safe distance, while maintaining their presence in the enemy line.

The Corcyraean fleet broadened its line with three large squadrons advancing quickly towards the Corinthians and their allies from the southwest.

Whoosh! Whoosh! Whoosh! The long oars clawed the sea in fast long sweeps and the wooden missiles hurtled towards one another like birds of prey, their ramming horns bristling just below the waterline.

Hoplites were on the decks with javelins, together with archers and men holding grappling hooks at the ready. The tension in the atmosphere was heavy, as it always is in those final minutes before a battle, when the lord of time makes every minute

seem as an hour – before the approaching chaos and death of battle, when raw fear chews at the guts like ravenous dogs, when yesterday's bravado becomes today's terror, and you suddenly wish that you were anywhere else but here.

Niarkhos felt it, the nameless fear within, his knees lost their firmness and seemed as straw before a wind, fear burning in his eyes, his mouth as dry as Saharan sand, his heart racing, his breath bated, his face pocked with icy domes of sweat.

Xenoklides looked sternly at him, seeing he might waver before the enemy. 'Easy, boy,' he said quietly from the corner of his mouth. 'Deep breaths. It will pass.'

The Corinthian spearhead slipped through the water in an unbroken formation, one ship following behind the other in single line, propelling steadily towards the long defensive line of the enemy fleet.

At the front, Xenoklides was advancing diagonally towards the enemy making fourteen knots with a fast oar, while the Ambraciots and Megarians began to broaden their line behind at a steady speed. Xenoklides wouldn't be able to maintain his speed for long before the rowers were exhausted.

He concentrated his mind entirely on the closing gap between himself and the enemy. He wanted to get in and damage as many Corcyraeans as he could as fast as he could, to drive his advanced squadrons right through them like a thunderbolt, then to come about behind them before the enemy, in their tight formations had the time or space to respond.

'Come about now!!!' he yelled. 'Ramming speed!!!'

'Ramming speed!!!' came the cry from below and the flutes played even faster, driving the rowers to their absolute limits, their bodies running with rivers of sweat, will and muscle drawing every reserve they had.

Xenoklides looked at the coxswains at the pedalia. 'Now!!!'

The coxswains pulled on the steering arms and all at once the ship tilted to port as she turned quickly in the water towards a Corcyraean trireme's amidships as if coming about to ram it.

The trierarch of the Corcyraean ship, seeing the Palaemon heading right for him commanded his rowers to a fast oar to maneuver his ship out of harm's way.

It was exactly what Xenoklides expected and hoped for. He stood at the prow, his hand grasping the landing ladder, which was secured by ropes to the bow-edge where it curved up overhead from the keel, his sharp unblinking eyes fixed on his prey. Turn too soon and he'll miss him; turn too late and he'll damage both their ships.

He could hear the Corcyraeans' frantic shouts for more speed. 'Now!!!' Xenoklides shouted back to the coxswains-

The Corcyraean ship, desperately rowing to avoid being rammed grew over the prow as the Palaemon swung hard to starboard with a swish of water, the portside oars drawing in as they arced through the sea, the Palaemon's prow turning sharply to run alongside the Corcyraean ship-

By the time the Corcyraean commander realized the Corinthian was after disabling him by breaking his oars it was too late – the Palaemon careened along their keel with a tremendous shudder and groan with a crunch and grind of timber, and a thunderous roar of men exchanging javelins, arrows and insults from across their decks. Too late for the Corcyraeans to retract their oars, the Palaemon ploughed through them, smashing and splintering them like dry twigs.

Most of the Corcyraean warships, seeing Xenoklides' tactic, and suspecting similar from others in his coalition to do likewise drew in their oars as the Corinthian ships sped in amongst them.

Within the hour, chaos had broken out everywhere and the screams and battle cries of men and splintering wood filled the air.

Thick acrid smoke belched up from some ships that had been struck by burning arrows and javelins.

Instead of rowing on to regroup, Xenoklides kept the fighting tight, his ships going in amongst the enemy. He did not simply want to put their vessels out of action, he wanted to capture or destroy them, to cripple Corcyra's ability to fight a sea war for years to come, and take their crews and officers captive.

The grappling hooks were thrown, too many for all to be cut or thrown back, and the ships were drawn together into islands of wood. Marines and sailors armed with shields and swords leapt from ship to ship engaging in vicious and bloody hand-to-hand combat, the air thick with screams and blood and smoke.

The fighting was fierce and bloody as they hacked into one another, impaling opponents on their javelins and spears. Men fell into the sea, many crushed to death between the ships as they butted together in this land battle upon islands of wood. Others, weighted down by their cuirasses and linothorax armor, sank beneath the surface never to reappear.

Everywhere was carnage and madness, reason abandoned to the primordial condition of survival and self-preservation.

Xenoklides was fighting ferociously for his life and for the glory of victory, the gods and Corinth, cleaving and stabbing into the enemy without hesitation or mercy. His blood-spattered face snarled fiercely inside his helmet as he put every fiber of his strength and skill into the frenzy of battle. Men all around him fighting, screaming – dying, the decks became slippery under slicks of blood, cluttered with corpses, wounded men and hacked off body parts.

The Athenian ships were still hanging back from the battle, while their commander, Lakedaimonios procrastinated, mindful of his orders not to engage the Corinthians unless they attempted to land on Corcyraean territory.

The battle drew on for several hours more and the Corcyraean ships on the left had routed the Corinthian right wing, putting several Ambraciot and Corinthian vessels out of action. Several others were chased off and driven into the jagged rocks of the islets ripping open their hulls.

It was a different story on the Corinthian left wing. There, Corinth had the advantage over the Corcyraean right and were ravaging their ships. Ramming two amidships, their ramming horns crashed through the enemy's keels with a dreadful crash and squealing crunch of imploding wood. The hideous screams of injured and panic stricken men billowed out from the rowing decks where dozens were crushed to death and impaled on giant splinters of wood.

Finally, seeing the distress of their allies, Lakedaimonios gave the order to engage and the ten Athenian warships sprang into action, speeding through the sea to reinforce the Corcyraean right, but they couldn't reach their beleaguered allies in time. The Corinthians and their allies had fatally mauled the Corcyraeans. Hundreds of men were screaming for help, their ships adrift, listing and floundering, bodies and debris floating everywhere, the clear water misted with clouds of blood.

The Corinthians had overwhelmed the enemy's right and Xenoklides' fleet was gaining the upper hand on their center as well. Xenoklides' ships had gotten right in among them and now maneuvered relatively unopposed through the wreckage of rammed and disabled vessels.

Elsewhere, hoplite marines aboard the Megarian ships were leaning over the sides with their spears, mercilessly slaughtering men in the water rather than taking them prisoner.

Not everyone was being killed; some of the Corinthian and Megarian sailors picked up Corcyraean survivors and dragged them aboard their ships. But it was a clear sign that mercy was in short supply on both sides today.

In his peripheral vision, from out of the turmoil, Xenoklides spotted a spear flying across the deck – he shouted to Arrabaios – too late, the back of Arrabaios' skull exploded out of his helmet as the spear smashed into his face and out the back of his head; blood, bone and brain matter splattered Xenoklides' armor. He registered a moment of horror, then looked for Niarkhos who was doing his father proud at the rail, repelling boarders with shield and sword.

At the stern, a dozen Corcyraean marines had managed to scramble aboard but they were being held off – for the moment.

'You!' Xenoklides barked to a marine who was running to jump aboard the Corcyraean ship. The warrior turned to him, breathless and covered in blood. Xenoklides gestured to the skirmish at the stern... 'Take some men and help them repel those boarders!'

Niarkhos was as bloody as a slaughter-man, exhausted and wounded in the left arm, wielding his bloody sword in his right fist, he hacked into a Corcyraean officer's neck with a downwards blow and the officer fell back and dropped between the ships into the sea.

'They're retreating!' someone shouted out from the chaos.

And from somewhere distant, a horn lamented the signal of retreat.

Xenoklides looked off towards the islands, where he saw the Corcyraean triremes withdrawing from the battle, many of them badly damaged. Ten more of their vessels were so badly damaged, the *trierarchs* who commanded them ordered them run aground onto the rocks to put them beyond the enemy's use.

Losses were heavy on both sides, but Xenoklides declared that the day belonged to Corinth.

But did it?

Once calm was restored and the Corinthian-led fleet regrouped and Xenoklides called a meeting of the trierarchs on the beach where their masts and supplies were stowed. He gathered them around him. 'Today Nike gave us her smile, tomorrow, she will give us Corcyra,' he said.

The captains looked at one another.

'I intend to press the advantage, gentlemen,' he went on, his eyes roving them. 'Tomorrow we pursue this arrogant enemy to his lair. We will send their fleet to the bottom of the sea, and we will send the Athenians home. We will retake the island and bring them once more to our will,' he said. 'Those too severely wounded to fight will return to our home ports on the damaged ships and report this momentous victory. And we will raise a trophy to Nike and Poseidon!'