

# *Prologue*



Apulia, southern Italy, summer 216 BC

**A**fter their stunning victory over more than eighty thousand Romans, Hannibal had let his soldiers rest for a night and a day and another night. It was as well, thought Hanno, studying the faces of the assembled officers and chieftains, some fifty-odd men. They were Carthaginians, Numidians, Iberians and Gauls. Their faces and arms had been cleansed of blood, and they might have caught up on some sleep, yet to a man they looked shattered. Exhausted. Drained.

Hanno, a lean young soldier with black hair, felt the same way. How could he not? The fighting at Cannae had lasted all day under a burning summer sun. Even when the tide had turned against the Romans, the killing had gone on, because the legionaries had been surrounded. The unrelenting slaughter had finished only when darkness fell, when the Carthaginian soldiers were covered in gore from head to foot, when their horses had been crimson from the bottoms of their necks to their hooves. Gone were the fields of stubble that had been there at dawn; in their place, the fighting had left fields of blood.

The toll on the survivors had been more than physical. More than fifty thousand Romans lay dead twenty stadia hence, but eight thousand of Hannibal's men would never see another dawn either. Hanno's father Malchus had died that day. Hanno stifled the grief that rose within him.

Most of those nearby had suffered the loss of a loved one too; if they had not, it was certain that they had seen close friends and comrades die. Yet it had been worth it. Rome had been dealt a hammer blow the likes of which it had never felt. Its standing army had been reduced by more than two-thirds; one of its consuls had been slain, so too had many hundreds of its ruling class. The devastating news would already be sending tremors through every town and city in Italy. Against all the odds, Hannibal had beaten the largest army ever assembled by the Roman Republic. What would he do next? Since Hannibal had ordered them here, to the open ground before his tent, the same question had been on everyone's lips.

Hanno caught his older brother Bostar's eye. 'Any idea of what he'll say?' he whispered.

'Your guess is as good as mine.'

'Let's hope that he orders us to march on Rome,' interjected Sapho, the oldest of the three siblings. 'I want to burn the damn place to the ground.'

For all that his relationship with Sapho was fractious, Hanno longed to do that too. If the army that had just defeated them so decisively turned up at its gates, surely Rome would surrender?

'First, we need to move our camp further from the battlefield,' said Sapho, wrinkling his nose. 'I'm sick of the stench.'

Hanno grimaced in agreement. The summer's heat would only intensify the ever-present odour of rotting flesh. Nonetheless, Bostar let out a *phhhh* of contempt. 'Hannibal has more on his mind than your offended nostrils!'

'I was making a joke, something you wouldn't understand,' growled Sapho.

Hanno scowled at them both. 'Enough! He's here.' The black-cloaked *scutarii* who served as their general's bodyguard had snapped upright.

A moment's pause, and Hannibal emerged from his tent into the early-morning sunlight. The tired officers raised a rousing cheer. Hanno bellowed for all he was worth; so too did his brothers. Here was a man worth following. A man who had led his army thousands of stadia from Iberia, across Gaul and into Italy, there to heap humiliations upon Rome.

Hannibal was dressed as if for battle. Over his purple tunic, he wore a burnished bronze cuirass; layered linen *pteryges* protected his groin and shoulders and a simple Hellenistic helmet covered his head. A strip of purple fabric covered the space where his right eye should have been. He carried no shield, but was armed with a simple sheathed *falcata*. Hannibal also looked tired, but the pleasure on his broad, bearded face as he met his officers' acclaim seemed genuine. His remaining eye sparkled. Planting his feet a stride apart, he raised his hands.

Silence fell at once.

'Has it sunk in yet?' asked Hannibal.

'What, sir?' Sapho enquired with a wicked grin.

There were loud chuckles, and Hannibal inclined his head with a smile. 'I think you know what, son of Malchus.'

'It's beginning to, sir,' answered Sapho.

Murmurs of agreement; satisfied looks shared. Before the battle, thought Hanno, no one had doubted Hannibal's tactical expertise, but now his abilities seemed to verge on the godlike. Their fifty thousand soldiers had faced twice that number of Romans and come away not just victorious, but all conquering.

'Any time I forget, sir,' added Sapho, 'the smell reminds me of how many of the enemy we killed.'

More laughter.

'We'll be moving camp soon enough, never fear,' said Hannibal. He paused, and the amusement died away.

'Where to, sir? The plain of Mars, outside Rome?' shouted Hanno. He was pleased that many officers nodded in approval, including Maharbal, Hannibal's cavalry commander.

'I know that is what most of you want,' Hannibal answered. 'But that is not my plan. It's nearly two and a half thousand stadia to Rome. The men are exhausted. Our grain mightn't last the journey, let alone feed us once we got there. Rome's walls are high, and we have no siege engines. While we sat outside building them – with empty bellies – the Republic's

other legions would be marching to attack us in the rear. By the time that they arrived, we would have to fall back or be caught between them and the city's garrison.'

Hannibal's words fell like lead shot. Hanno's enthusiasm waned before his general's certainty. The same unhappiness was clear in many faces around him, in the muttered words between neighbours.

'It may not come to that, sir,' challenged Maharbal.

A surprised hush fell.

'We've beaten the Romans three times, sir,' Maharbal went on. 'Trowned them at the Trebia, Lake Trasimene and here, at Cannae. They must have lost a hundred thousand men by now. Only the gods know how many equestrians and senators have died, but it's a large portion of the total. We're free to wander their land, burning and pillaging. If we march on Rome, they will sue for peace – I know it!'

'Damn right,' said Sapho.

There were loud rumbles of agreement.

Maharbal's words appealed, but Hanno was remembering how his friend Quintus, aged just sixteen, had faced up to three armed bandits – on his own. He had to be one of the most stubborn, courageous people Hanno ever met. These were not unusual characteristics for a Roman. During the battle two days before, many of the legionaries had continued to fight on even when it was clear that they had been defeated.

Hannibal rubbed a contemplative finger along his lips. 'You're so sure,' he said at last, eyeing first Maharbal, and then Sapho.

'Yes, sir. Who can take such a beating as we delivered two days ago and continue to fight on? No one!' declared Sapho.

'He speaks true,' said an officer. 'Aye,' rumbled another.

If Quintus lives, he will not give up while there is a breath still in his body, thought Hanno grimly. He would struggle to the death rather than submit.

Hannibal's bright eye fixed on Sapho. 'Maharbal knows the entire story of our first war against the Republic, but do you?'

‘Of course, sir. I grew up on my father’s tales of it.’

‘Did he ever tell you of the occasions when the Roman fleets had been sunk, and their treasuries were empty?’

Sapho flushed a little, remembering. ‘Yes, sir.’

Hanno could recall the story too.

‘Any normal people would have recognised defeat after such major disasters. Instead, the Roman nobles sold their own properties to raise money for the construction of new ships. The war went on, because the stubborn bastards would not admit that they had been beaten. And we all know what happened at the end of that conflict.’

Angry murmurs, mention of reparations and territories lost.

‘The Romans have never been vanquished as they were here, though, sir,’ said Sapho.

‘True,’ admitted Hannibal. ‘And therefore my hope and expectation is that they will sue for peace. With that in mind, Carthalo’ – here he pointed to one of his senior cavalry officers – ‘will tomorrow lead an embassy to Rome, there to deliver terms to the Senate.’

*This might work.* ‘What terms, sir?’ asked Hanno.

‘Rome will recognise the honour and power of Carthage. It will return to us Sicily, Sardinia and Corsica, and acknowledge our pre-eminence in the seas west of those islands. If the Republic does not accept these terms, then, as the gods are my witness, it will see enough death and destruction visited upon its citizens to make the battle here look like a skirmish. This, while the non-Roman peoples who come over to us shall live under our protection.’

Maharbal shook his head, but many officers exchanged pleased looks. ‘Those demands are reasonable enough,’ said Bostar. ‘Rome will see that, surely?’

They had been releasing captured non-Romans for a good while, but Hanno hadn’t fully appreciated Hannibal’s purpose before. ‘You want to break up the Republic, sir?’

‘I do. It isn’t that long since peoples such as the Samnites, Oscans and

Bruttians were conquered or came under Roman influence. I want them to seize their liberty with both hands. Allied to Carthage, they will be free to determine their own futures. Few of you will know, but there have already been approaches from leaders of cities such as Capua about severing their links with Rome.'

That went down well with the officers.

Sapho looked disappointed, but Hanno didn't notice. Defeating Rome was what he had always craved, but he had another reason for wanting the war to be over. Quintus' sister, Aurelia, had flashed into his mind. If the fighting ended, he would be able to seek her out. A burning hope lit in Hanno's heart. Let Rome see that it is beaten, he prayed. Let there be peace.

'Would it not be better, sir, to be more aggressive? Why not let me ride ahead with our cavalry?' asked Maharbal, his expression eager. 'The dogs will only hear of our approach after we have arrived. I could deliver your message with thousands of horsemen at my back. You and the rest of the army can follow on behind. If the Romans have not agreed to the terms by then, your appearance would make up their minds.'

'I agree, sir,' said Sapho. 'We should march on Rome.'

'*Should?*' Hannibal studied Sapho for a moment, and his lips thinned. Sapho met his stare at first, but he couldn't keep it up. Hannibal's face softened as he cast his gaze at Maharbal. 'My mind is made up. Carthalo and his companions will carry my words to Rome. The troops need rest, and so do your riders. I am going to give it to them.'

'Truly the gods do not grant everything to the same man,' said Maharbal sombrelly. 'You know how to win a victory, Hannibal, but you do not how to use one.'

# PART ONE





# Chapter I



*Two and a half years later . . .*  
Apulia, late winter

**I**t was a fresh morning. A light, cool breeze carried in from the east, where the sea lay, one hundred stadia away. The worst of the winter weather had gone, for which Hanno was grateful. Over the previous few months, the temperatures had not often been harsh, but he still missed the warmth of Carthage, his home. The sun's heat on his face, and signs that the plants were beginning to grow again, would be welcome.

As usual, he found Muttumbaal among the Libyans of his phalanx. If his second-in-command wasn't sleeping, he was with their men. They were his entire world, for he had neither wife nor family, and he was assiduous in their care. No one had ever called Mutt by his full cumbersome name, except perhaps his mother, thought Hanno wryly. To the world, his dour subordinate was just known as Mutt. He was a damn fine officer, and had covered for Hanno on innumerable occasions. Saved his life more than once too.

Mutt was drilling the men on the open ground beyond the camp perimeter. It was a habit that Hanno continued to find amusing. They were some of Hannibal's most hard-bitten veterans, who knew their craft inside out. Career soldiers, they had travelled from Carthage to Iberia, from there to Gaul, over the Alps and into Italy. They had fought – and won – more battles for Hannibal than anyone could remember. Yet that didn't stop Mutt from

insisting on regular drill and marching sessions. ‘Let them sit on their arses for too long, sir, and they’ll get rusty,’ he’d said when Hanno had questioned the tactic. Over time, Hanno had had to admit that Mutt’s reasoning was sound, given the existence that they had all lived since Cannae. There was still occasional fighting, but much of their routine was to stay in camp. Yes, there were marches to defend a pro-Carthaginian town or city from a Roman army that was threatening it, but their fearsome reputation meant that this tactic usually made the legions withdraw without a fight. Large swathes of southern Italy were now on their side, which meant that combat had become less common. Frustratingly, that didn’t mean that the war had been won. Far from it, Hanno thought bitterly. Plenty of Rome’s allies remained loyal, even when their territory was surrounded by those friendly with Carthage.

Capua was allied to Hannibal, but nearby towns were not. He pictured Quintus’ sister Aurelia, how she’d been when he had last seen her near Capua, and his heart squeezed. There had been no chance to find her since, and there probably never would be. He swallowed down his feelings. It was as well, for she would have forgotten him by now.

Spotting a dust-covered rider urging his horse towards the camp, his mood soured a little more. ‘Who’ll be begging for help this time?’ he said to no one in particular.

Mutt heard him, and wandered over. ‘It’ll be the same old story, sir. “A Roman army is at our gates. We need your assistance. Come with all haste.”’

Hanno laughed, before saying something that he would admit to few others. ‘Sometimes it seems as if Cannae wasn’t enough. If only their new legions would take us on. We’d kick their arses.’

Mutt hawked and spat. ‘I’d be surprised if they’re that stupid again, sir.’

Mutt was right, thought Hanno angrily. Since Cannae, their enemies had recruited and trained more than ten new legions. They operated in consular-sized forces of two legions throughout the peninsula – substantial enough to be militarily potent without losing the ability to be manoeuvrable and fast-moving – concentrating on the defeat of cities and peoples who had deserted the Republic.

‘Cannae taught them a real lesson, sir.’

‘They’re scheming dogs.’ Hanno knew all too well how it worked. If Hannibal tried to face these legions, or to draw them into pursuit, they backed away or retreated into the mountains where the huge Carthaginian superiority in cavalry was negated. Not for the first time, Hanno remembered Maharbal’s warning just after Cannae. Had their general made the wrong decision when he decided not to march on Rome? Hanno wasn’t sure, nor would he mention it to a soul other than Mutt or Bostar. As well as feeling disloyal by discussing it, no one really knew the answer. It was impossible to predict what might have happened. Obsessing about the past did nobody any good, he decided. They had to deal with the present. ‘We’re hardly doing badly. Hannibal is undefeated; at no time since Cannae has it looked any other way.’

‘Scuse me, sir.’ Mutt had noticed something untoward. He strode towards the men, shouting orders.

Hanno fell back to brooding. In Iberia, the situation was not as good as it had been. A number of Carthaginian defeats had seen many tribes changing sides to support Rome. Happily, Sicily was another story. There Carthage had new, powerful supporters. Hippocrates and Epiclydes, two Syracusan nobles who had fought with Hannibal, and been subsequently sent by him to the island to foment unrest, had of recent days seized control of the great fortress of Syracuse. This advance – upsetting the city’s fifty-year status as an ally of Rome – increased the likelihood of further help from Carthage on the island. Hanno prayed that the Syracusan and Carthaginian troops on Sicily would be victorious. That outcome would see Hannibal receive reinforcements, which would be warmly received.

The war has taken us from one end of Italy to the other, thought Hanno. His right hand strayed to his neck, the fingers slipping under the cloth that hid his scar from the world. He’d received it as a prisoner in Victumulae, thousands of stadia to the north. Pera, the Roman officer who had given it to him, had been a sadistic bastard. No doubt the sewer

rat had been killed in the sack of the town, but Hanno wished that he could have personally seen him on his way to the underworld. Bomilcar, the Carthaginian who had saved Hanno's life, had been assigned to a different Libyan phalanx afterwards. He had survived Trasimene and Cannae, and the campaigning since. Hanno felt a stab of guilt that he hadn't been better at keeping in touch. I'll seek him out tonight, he decided. Bring along a jug of decent wine.

Hanno tramped over to join Mutt. The pair spent the next couple of hours sweating, shouting at the men and getting involved in the more complicated manoeuvres. By the time that they had finished, Hanno had forgotten all about Aurelia and his concerns with the campaign. 'Mutt, come with me this evening,' he said as they led the soldiers back to the camp.

'Where, sir?'

After this long, the honorific still jarred. Hanno had told his second-in-command on numerous occasions not to bother with it, but Mutt was intransigent. 'The men need to know that there's a difference between you and me, sir, just as there is between me and them,' he had replied. Mutt was as stubborn as a mule, so Hanno said nothing.

'I want to find Bomilcar. The man who got me out of the cell in Victumulae,' he explained when Mutt's face remained blank. 'I haven't seen him in months. It'd be good to have a few cups of wine with him. I would appreciate your company. He would too.'

'Aye, sir, that sounds—' Mutt broke off as a troop of chattering Numidians cantered past, as ever clad in nothing but their sleeveless tunics. '—good,' he finished.

'Excellent.' Hanno clapped him on the shoulder. He could feel a fine session looming. On the rare occasions that he'd persuaded Mutt to drink with him, things had got very messy indeed. It didn't matter if that happened, though. Life was quiet at the moment. No one more senior would care if he spent the following day in his blankets, recovering.

It was then that he caught sight of Sapho walking towards them. Hanno's

mood dampened. No one more senior would disapprove perhaps, but his oldest brother, who was of equivalent rank, undoubtedly would. Since their youth, Sapho had liked to act as if he were Hanno's moral guardian. 'Not a word about tonight,' he hissed.

Mutt knew Hanno well enough. 'My lips are sealed, sir.'

'Ho, brother!' Sapho called out. 'Well met.'

'Well met indeed.' Hanno pulled a smile that was only half fake. Some of the time, he got on with Sapho. To his endless annoyance, he could never quite predict which brother would greet him: the snide, ruthless Sapho who had – probably, although Hanno had no proof – considered letting him drown in a mud pool in Etruria, or the jovial, considerate Sapho who brought wine and told him what Hannibal was planning, as had happened before Trasimene.

'Training your men?' Sapho fell into step beside him.

'Indeed.'

'Mine are on a hundred stadia run with my second-in-command.'

Hanno heard his soldiers' dismayed mutters as Sapho's words carried over his shoulder. 'Any special reason for that?'

'They're getting wine bellies from lying about, doing nothing but drink. It's time that they got back into shape.'

A devilment took Hanno, and he poked at his brother's stomach, which wasn't as flat as it had been. 'Shouldn't you be with them?' He heard Mutt's snort quickly converted to a cough.

Sapho shoved back at him, annoyed. 'I'm as fit as I ever was, you cheeky pup!'

'Of course you are,' said Hanno. I shouldn't have said a word, he thought. It's not worth the aggravation. To his relief, Sapho let it drop.

They made idle chitchat on the walk back, passing through the large gateway that granted access through the tall earthen fortifications. Relieved that Sapho appeared not to have sought him out for any particular reason, Hanno began to relax. He was beginning to consider the idea of inviting Sapho along that night – surprising himself – when he spotted Bostar with

a couple of other officers, coming their way. His heart sank. Any time his two older brothers got together, there was potential for trouble.

To his surprise, a convivial air reigned as the groups converged. Bostar introduced his companions, two phalanx commanders whom Hanno vaguely knew but whom Sapho hailed like long-lost comrades. The five men chatted about the usual sort of things: the weather, the state of their men's fitness, how bad their rations were, whether there had been any reliable sightings of Roman forces, where the next enemy attack would be and so on. Everything was fine until Sapho mentioned, as he just had to Hanno, that his men needed to improve their fitness because of the amounts that they'd been drinking. At this point, Bostar pointed at Sapho's belly and commented, 'There's a bit of extra flesh there, or my eyes are mistaken, brother.'

Sapho flared up like a bush fire. 'What are you saying?'

Bostar, who was still lean as a hunting dog, shrugged. 'You have a slight gut. Some exercise would do you some good too.'

Sapho's eyes filled with suspicion. He swung from Bostar to Hanno and back. 'You two have been talking behind my back, haven't you? Laughing at me!'

'No!' protested Hanno truthfully.

'We haven't said a word,' said Bostar with a trace of a smirk. Hanno cursed him for it. Now was not the time to rile Sapho further, over something so inconsequential. The two other officers already looked embarrassed – and less than impressed.

Of course Sapho homed in on Bostar's expression like a fly to shit. 'Then why the little smile, eh?'

'We haven't said a word to one another, Sapho, I swear it,' said Hanno, annoyed at the way this was degenerating.

'Really?' Sapho's mistrustful expression eased, but his face was full of rage as he turned on Bostar. 'Just had to get a joke in in front of your friends, was that it?'

'As if you wouldn't do the same, if I were overweight!' retorted Bostar.

‘Screw you!’ snarled Sapho. Before anyone could react, he’d stepped in and thrown a powerful punch to Bostar’s chin, snapping his head and body backwards. *Thump*. He went down on to the flat of his back. Sapho waded in, throwing kicks and stamping on Bostar with his studded sandals. ‘Always think you know better than me, don’t you?’ he shouted, spittle flying from his lips. ‘Well, you don’t!’

Hanno shoved himself between Sapho and the groaning Bostar. ‘Get off him!’

Sapho didn’t seem to hear. With superhuman strength, he pushed Hanno out of the way. The tiny delay had given Bostar a chance to get up, however. Roaring with anger, he flung himself at Sapho, arms outstretched, and caught him around the middle. The pair went sprawling on to the dirt, each raining punches upon the other. Hanno looked on in dismay. From the corner of his eye, he could see Bostar’s two companions and Mutt doing the same. His inaction lasted only a moment. This had to be stopped. As much as anything, it was a terrible example for the men to see officers brawling.

‘Help me separate them,’ he ordered Mutt. ‘You grab Bostar. I’ll go for Sapho.’ Hanno leaped in and grabbed one of Sapho’s flailing arms. With that grip he was able to heave his brother back, managing at the same time to seize his other arm from underneath. Hanno bent his elbows, securing his purchase on Sapho’s upper body. Sapho spat and cursed, but was unable to break free. That didn’t stop him aiming another kick at Bostar, who was lying helpless underneath Mutt. There was a groan from Bostar as the blow landed, and Sapho chuckled. ‘How do you like that, you filth?’

Hanno wrenched Sapho back several steps. There was a yelp of pain.

‘Gods, my shoulders!’

‘Good.’ Tightening his grip, Hanno dragged him back another pace or two. Sapho began to speak, but Hanno had had enough. ‘Shut your trap!’ He peered over Sapho’s shoulder. ‘Mutt?’

‘Sir?’

‘Have you got Bostar under control?’

‘Yes, sir.’

‘Good. He’s to promise not to start fighting again. Then you can let him go. If he won’t, hold him down.’ Hanno moved his lips to Sapho’s ear. ‘This has to end. Do you hear me?’

‘I—’ Sapho began to growl.

‘No, Sapho, I won’t have it! You’re a grown man, and an officer, not a ten-year-old boy!’ There was no response, so Hanno squeezed with all his might, forcing Sapho’s arms upwards and back even further. Another hiss of pain from his brother. ‘Understand?’ demanded Hanno.

‘Fine. Yes,’ came the surly reply.

‘Bostar has agreed,’ said Mutt.

‘Release him.’ Hanno slackened his grip on Sapho, allowing him to step away. He moved to stand between his two brothers, still furious. Bostar was regarding him with surprise, and Sapho with smouldering anger. Hanno was so incensed that he didn’t care what either of them thought. ‘You’re both a disgrace to your rank and station! Senior officers, fighting like two drunks, and in front of common soldiers. Hannibal would have the pair of you flogged for this. I’ve a good mind to do the same myself.’ Their mouths opened in shock, but Hanno wasn’t finished. ‘Father might be gone, but that doesn’t mean he’s not looking down on you in disgust, the last of our family. He would have told you that our war is with the damn Romans, not each other. Isn’t it?’ He eyeballed them.

‘It is,’ mumbled Bostar after a moment.

‘Sapho?’

‘Yes, I suppose.’

‘Then start acting like a man, instead of a child!’

Sapho flushed, but did not answer back.

‘I want you both to take an oath that this quarrelling will end here and now,’ commanded Hanno.

His brothers looked unhappy. ‘And if I don’t agree?’ demanded Sapho.



‘As the gods are my witness, I will tell Hannibal,’ replied Hanno from between clenched teeth.

Bostar sighed. ‘I will swear.’

‘My little brother has all grown up,’ murmured Sapho.

‘What’s your answer to be?’ barked Hanno.

‘I will also swear,’ said Sapho mildly.

Hanno didn’t trust the look in Sapho’s eyes, but he had backed down. Hanno moved his fingers away from his sword hilt, where they had begun to stray. ‘Speak your oaths,’ he ordered.

One after the other, his brothers swore to all the Carthaginian gods that they would bury their feud forever. When they were done, both glanced at Hanno. They’re waiting to see if I am satisfied, he realised, shocked by the sea change in their relationship. A few moments before, he had been the youngest brother, lowest in the pecking order. Now he had acted as their father might have, and they had accepted it. ‘Fine.’ He glanced at Mutt. ‘We’ve wasted enough time here. Have the men form up again, ready to march.’

Mutt roared out a command. Sapho, Bostar and the two others quickly moved out of the way. Hanno began to feel proud of what he’d done. Whether the two would honour their promise remained to be seen, but the strength of their vow would prevent them from fighting, for the time being at least. He wondered if Sapho would seek revenge on him for the humiliation. If he does, I’ll be ready, he decided. As I have been for some time. ‘Forward march!’ he cried.

‘Hold!’ shouted a voice.

Thinking it was one of his brothers, Hanno continued to advance. Mutt and the rest followed.

‘HOLD, I SAY!’ repeated the voice.

Realising it was someone else altogether, Hanno ground to a halt.

A short distance away, a nondescript soldier threw back the hood of his cloak. He was one-eyed, broad-faced, bearded.

There was a universal gasp of amazement.

Hanno was first to react. ‘Attention!’ he cried, snapping upright. ‘Your general is here.’

His men stiffened to attention. His brothers and their companions did the same. Hannibal stalked over, his face a blank. Hanno began to feel nervous. It had always been their general’s habit to wander among his soldiers incognito, his purpose to assess their morale, their mood. Since Cannae, this practice appeared to have lapsed. Until now, thought Hanno. His certainty that he had acted in the correct manner wavered. Hannibal was liable to punish lapses of discipline severely. *Gods, what will he do?*

Neither Bostar nor Sapho could meet Hannibal’s eye as he spoke. ‘I’ve been aware of the animosity between you for a long while, but I had no idea that it was this bad.’

‘Sir, I—’ began Sapho.

‘Quiet!’ Hannibal’s voice cracked like a whip.

Sapho subsided.

‘Sapho, the wild but courageous one. Bostar, also brave as a lion, but more dutiful.’ Hannibal’s gaze moved to Hanno, who squirmed beneath it. ‘The cub, usually the one to do as he pleased. The one who needed disciplining the most, or so I thought.’ He paced to and fro, letting the brothers sweat.

‘Under normal circumstances, this incident would have passed me by,’ Hannibal said at last. ‘But I was here, and I saw it.’

Hanno’s eyes flickered to his brothers’ faces. He wasn’t alone in holding his breath.

‘It’s a poor sign when two of my phalanx commanders brawl with each other like a pair of drunks outside a whorehouse.’

Hanno stared at the ground, acutely aware that he would have to accept whatever punishment was meted out to them – and him.

‘It seems to me that the vow Hanno forced you to take should be enough to keep the peace.’

Relief – and a little disbelief – all round, although none of the brothers dared to relax.

‘If we were not at war, I would strip you both to the ranks, *at the very least*.’ He glared at Sapho and Bostar, who both looked ashamed. ‘However, *we are* at war, and in a foreign land. Officers of your calibre are impossible to replace.’ He raised a warning finger. ‘Yet the matter cannot go unaddressed. Therefore, despite your oath, I am going to separate you. Permanently.’

All three exchanged worried glances, and Hannibal laughed. It was not an altogether pleasant sound. ‘I’ve had word that my brother Hasdrubal in Iberia needs experienced officers. Despite the shortage in my own forces, I am going to send him a few men. Bostar, you will be one of them. You will have to go by sea, because it would take too long to travel by land. The voyage will be dangerous in the extreme – I expect you know that. Two of the last three ships sent from Iberia have been sunk or taken by the Romans. Gods willing, *you* will make it. Once there you will do all in your power to help Hasdrubal and our other generals defeat the enemy.’

‘I will do my best, sir,’ said Bostar with a resolute nod.

‘Good.’ Hannibal rounded on Sapho, who flinched a little. ‘You, I will keep by my side. Don’t think that that means life will be easy. For a start, you and your phalanx will be on extended patrols for the next three months.’

‘Thank you, sir,’ said Sapho stolidly. ‘We will do all that is asked of us.’

Why did it have to be Bostar who was sent away? thought Hanno furiously. He might never see his favourite brother again. That idea was terrible to contemplate. Hannibal’s attention fell on him then, and Hanno forgot about his brothers. Where was he to be sent?

‘And so to you, youngest son of Malchus,’ said Hannibal.

A pulse hammered at the base of Hanno’s throat. Punishment would be forthcoming, of that he had no doubt.

‘Your father was ever a valiant servant of Carthage. His loss was a personal sorrow for you and your brothers, of course, but I too grieve for him still,’ said Hannibal.

‘Thank you, sir,’ Hanno replied. It helped to have his father’s sacrifice acknowledged. Bostar and Sapho also seemed pleased.

‘Malchus would be proud of you today. What age are you now?’

‘Twenty-three, sir.’

‘Young still. Your actions were impressive.’

Uneasy with the praise, Hanno shifted to and fro. ‘Th-thank you, sir.’

‘I have need of a trustworthy officer to undertake a dangerous mission. I had thought to send someone else, but what I have just seen has changed my mind. You will go instead.’

Hanno’s heart began to thump even faster. ‘Where, sir?’

Hannibal lowered his voice. ‘To Sicily.’

‘Sicily, sir?’ Hanno repeated, like a fool. Glancing at Mutt, his heart-strings tugged painfully. Mutt and his men felt like family. Besides, what use could he be without his soldiers? ‘Who will command my unit in my absence?’ he asked, stalling.

‘Why, Mutt here. Not as if he hasn’t done it before, is it?’

Panic flared in Hanno’s belly. Did his general know about his unauthorised leave of absence, before Cannae, when he had sought out Aurelia? His eyes went from Hannibal to Mutt, whose expression was as innocent as a babe’s, and back again.

‘The original officer who led your phalanx died in the crossing of the Alps. Mutt looked after them until I appointed you,’ said Hannibal.

‘Of course, sir.’ How could he have doubted Mutt? Hanno smiled as if he’d understood Hannibal’s meaning all along.

‘Come by my tent as soon as you’ve finished with your men.’

‘Very good, sir!’ Proud yet sad at what this meant, Hanno threw off a parade-ground salute.

‘As you were.’ Hannibal waved a hand in dismissal. Slipping up his hood, he walked off, just another ordinary soldier again.

‘So you two get special treatment while I have to stay in Italy.’ Sapho’s voice was sour.

‘You’re *staying* with the most important general in Carthage,’ retorted Hanno.

‘It’s as honourable to remain with Hannibal as it is to be sent overseas.’

added Bostar in a surprisingly conciliatory tone. 'Hannibal values you. He's said as much before.'

'True,' Sapho conceded, but the jealousy in his eyes gave the lie to his answer.

Sapho wouldn't be happy whatever the outcome, thought Hanno. He felt a whisper of relief that he would soon be far away from his oldest brother, yet that emotion was mixed with a contradictory sadness that he would be parted from not just Bostar, Mutt and his men, but Sapho too. There was every chance that they would never see each other again.

'We'll have to get together before any of us leave. Offer a sacrifice to Father's memory.' He paused. 'And then get royally pissed.'

## Chapter II



The light was fading as Hanno arrived at Hannibal's pavilion, his head full of thoughts of Sicily. Since losing the huge island in the first war with Rome, every Carthaginian had wanted it back. After all, much of it had been colonised by Carthage for nigh on two hundred years.

Half a dozen *scutarii* were on duty outside his general's tent. Hanno gave his name, which saw him ushered inside. A massive *scutarius* led the way.

The rich interior made Hanno feel as if he were stepping inside the house of one of his father's wealthy friends in Carthage. Fabric partitions divided the space up into rooms. Thick carpets covered the floors. In the larger chambers, bronze candelabras had been suspended from the rods that held up the roof. The hardwood furniture – chests, chairs and even couches – was heavy, and of good quality. They passed straight through the spacious meeting area where he and other officers sometimes received orders from Hannibal, and Hanno's stomach twisted a little. The fact that he was being guided to his general's private quarters was more proof that his mission was important.

The *scutarius* halted at a final partition, before which stood a similarly large specimen, notable for the massive scar across his nose. This hulk eyed Hanno with open suspicion. 'He's here to see the boss. Hanno, commander of a Libyan phalanx,' said the first soldier.

Scarface gave Hanno a salute that did what it was supposed to but still managed to convey a level of contempt. Hanno just stared back.

Everyone but the inner circle – men such as Maharbal – received the same treatment from Hannibal’s bodyguards. Scarface turned his head. ‘Sir?’ he called.

From within came a familiar voice. ‘Yes?’

‘Hanno, phalanx commander, is here, sir.’

‘Send him in.’

‘After you, sir,’ said Scarface to Hanno, with a trace more civility. He pulled aside the drape and waved him in. The first scutarius vanished back to the entrance.

Self-conscious, for all that he had shaved, washed his hair and was wearing his finest tunic, Hanno stepped inside. Hannibal was sitting at a desk, with his back towards him. He half turned, smiled. ‘Come. Sit.’ He waved a hand at the chair that stood to one side of his table.

‘Thank you, sir.’ Nervously, Hanno obeyed.

Hannibal’s one eye regarded him kindly. ‘Welcome. Wine?’

‘Please, sir.’

‘Sosian, do the necessary, will you?’

Hanno took not a little pleasure from the way that Sosian – Scarface – hurried to obey, becoming the servant rather than the threatening bodyguard. When both of them had a full cup, Hannibal raised his towards Hanno. ‘To your father, Malchus. A brave heart and a loyal servant to Carthage.’

Hanno swallowed the sudden lump that had formed in his throat. ‘To my father,’ he said.

They drank. Hanno offered up a prayer to the gods, asking that they look after both of his parents.

‘To victory against the Romans,’ said Hannibal.

‘I’ll drink to that, sir,’ said Hanno eagerly.

‘May it come sooner rather than later.’

Hanno studied Hannibal’s face, trying to read his thoughts on that matter. He couldn’t discern a thing, and didn’t dare to ask. They drained their cups. Scarface moved in, refilled them both.

‘It’s to your taste?’ asked Hannibal.

‘Yes, sir. It’s delicious.’

‘It comes from a little estate near Cannae, funnily enough. There’s not much of it left now. I keep it for special occasions.’

Hanno’s nerves gnawed at him afresh. ‘I see, sir.’

Hannibal chuckled. ‘Relax. I won’t bite you.’

Hanno had felt the edge of Hannibal’s temper before. That’s not why he was here tonight, though. He nodded. ‘Very well, sir.’

‘Tell me what you know of Sicily.’

‘It’s a rich island, sir. My father used to tell me that it was littered with large farms and prosperous towns.’

Hannibal’s eye twinkled. ‘So did mine. The bread basket of Italy, he called it. What else?’

‘It is the stepping stone between Africa and Italy, sir. Supremacy there would make our task immeasurably easier. Reinforcements and supplies could be moved from Carthage to Italy with few problems. Our army could be fed with the island’s produce, meaning that we wouldn’t need to change camp so often. The problem is that Rome controls most of Sicily, and the rest belongs to Syracuse, which has been no friend of Carthage for many years. Syracuse’s ruler allied himself to the Republic before the first war between our states.’ Here Hanno faltered a little. He knew that Hiero, the tyrant of Syracuse for more than half a century, had died soon after Cannae, but not the exact details of the deals and counter-deals that had happened since. ‘Since Hiero’s death, I know that his grandson was briefly in power. I’ve heard in recent days that Hippocrates and Epicydes may be ruling the city, and that they favour Carthage. More than that I don’t know, sir.’

‘It’s not surprising that you’re unaware of the very latest news. I’ll explain. Hiero’s grandson Hieronymus was a youth of fifteen when he ascended the throne. I had high hopes for him, because he initially spurned Rome. Before long, though, it became clear he was both rash and impetuous. Having sought alliance first with me, he began communicating directly with the authorities in Carthage.’ Hannibal frowned. ‘Cheeky pup.’



‘You were quick to respond to his overture, sir. I remember the departure for Sicily of Hippocrates and Epicycles. So their efforts have finally borne fruit?’

‘Indeed. The rumour you heard is true. At first, it seemed that they wouldn’t achieve anything, and for more than a year, Syracuse’s ties with Rome remained unsevered despite Hieronymus’ overtures to us. Their chance came some months ago when Hieronymus was murdered by a faction of disaffected nobles; soon after that his successor, an uncle, was assassinated along with much of the royal family. The bloodshed left a power vacuum. Hippocrates and Epicycles lobbied hard for two of the most powerful magistracies in the city – positions that had been left vacant by the wave of killings – and managed to secure them. When I heard that, I hoped that they would take control of Syracuse. But many still regarded them as outsiders, and they couldn’t rally enough support. So, instead, they seized Leontini, a town some two hundred stadia north of Syracuse. Bit of an unwise move, because it attracted the immediate attention of Marcus Claudius Marcellus.’

‘That’s the commander of the Roman forces on the island, sir?’

‘Yes. Within weeks, Hippocrates and Epicycles were driven from their new fiefdom. Humiliation – and then, on the road back to Syracuse, the two of them ran into a strong force of local troops marching to Leontini’s aid. Things looked dire, but instead the pair’s fortunes completely reversed. It’s funny how, for no apparent reason, disasters can turn into triumph,’ Hannibal said, chuckling. ‘Truly the gods can be generous.’

‘I don’t understand, sir,’ said Hanno.

‘The soldiers leading the force were Cretan mercenary archers, who as fortune had it, were well disposed towards Hippocrates and Epicycles. Even that wouldn’t have been enough to take over the entire Syracusan force, however. So, undeterred, the brothers told the rest of the soldiers that Marcellus had massacred the population of Leontini – which was a downright lie. Yet it was believed. They succeeded in persuading the eight thousand men to drive off their Syracusan officers and to accept them as commanders. With this small army at their backs, Hippocrates and Epicycles

marched on Syracuse where, against the odds once more, they managed to seize power.’ Hannibal banged his cup on the table. ‘So there you have it! A city of huge importance to Sicily, and therefore the whole war, is in the hands of two men who are no friends to Rome.’

Hanno felt rising confusion. ‘I don’t understand how I can help, sir.’  
‘I’ve picked you because you are loyal to me, heart and soul.’

Hanno’s heart swelled at this unexpected recognition. ‘Aye, sir,’ he muttered thickly.

‘That’s more than I can say of Hippocrates and Epicydes. They only ever fought for me in the hope that I could one day help them to become the twin tyrants of Syracuse. They’ll side with Carthage while it suits them, but either one would slit my throat – or yours – if the price was right.’

Hanno saw some of Hannibal’s intent now. ‘I am no spy, sir. I’m a simple soldier. Fighting is what I do. There must be other men you could send in my stead.’

‘Maybe so, but I have need of them here. That’s not to say that I don’t require you also,’ Hannibal added reassuringly, ‘but your second-in-command can fill your place for the moment. You’re an experienced officer, used to leading men and making decisions in a crisis. Hippocrates and Epicydes had the same opportunities as you, but neither ever made a particularly good leader. They have done well to achieve so much, but I worry for their future. You can help them. You’re intelligent and, even better, you are decisive. You showed that today.’

The praise made Hanno’s cheeks flush with renewed pride. ‘Thank you, sir. So you want me to assist them, militarily?’

‘Something like that, yes.’ Hannibal saw his indecision. ‘I won’t order you to go if you don’t want to. I’m asking you because I think you will do well.’ His eye burned with an intensity that held Hanno’s gaze.

Hanno forgot Bostar and Sapho. Forgot Mutt and his men. ‘I’d be honoured to do it, sir.’

A pleased nod. ‘I want you to be my eyes and ears in Syracuse. You will gather intelligence – about everything you can – and send word of

it to me when possible. Hippocrates and Epicydes will be told that you're to act as a military aide to their cause. You're to win their trust if you can, and to help them carry the fight to Marcellus and his legions with all of your ability. When reinforcements arrive from Carthage – and within twelve months, they will – you are to try and ensure that relations between the two sets of leaders are cordial from the start. When the Romans are beaten on Sicily' – here a wolfish smile – 'you are to keep Hippocrates and Epicydes sweet. Once that happens, all Carthaginian forces on the island will need to be transferred to Italy, but I'll want Hippocrates and Epicydes to provide us with soldiers and supplies as well.' Hannibal finished and studied him in silence.

Hanno's heart thudded in his chest. Gods, he thought. This is massively important to our cause. To the war. Far more important than leading a phalanx. 'I will do my best, sir, or die in the attempt.'

'Good man!' Hannibal clapped him on the shoulder. 'Let us hope that you succeed, and that you also survive to appreciate the fruits of your labours.' He slipped a heavy ring off the index finger of his right hand and held it out. 'I will give you letters of introduction of course, but this will act as proof that you are my man.'

Awestruck, Hanno took the gold ring, the top of which was embossed with a lion: one of the symbols used by the Barcid family. He would never be able to show this to Sapho. 'I . . .' he began, '. . . thank you, sir.'

'May the gods go with you to Sicily. We'll talk again before you leave.' Hannibal turned back to the parchment he'd been studying when Hanno entered.

He was being dismissed. Gripping the ring tightly in his right fist, Hanno stood. 'Thank you, sir.'

Wrapped up in his thoughts, with the ring burning a hole in his hand, Hanno wasn't watching where he was going. *Thump*. His head collided with someone. 'I'm sorry. That was my fault.' Even as the words left his mouth, he was stunned and delighted to recognise Bomilcar.

‘Of all the men in the army to walk into!’ cried Bomilcar, rubbing his forehead and beaming at the same time. ‘It’s good to see you, Hanno. How long has it been – six months?’

‘That and more,’ replied Hanno ruefully. ‘The funny thing is, I was planning to seek you out this very evening.’

‘That’s what they all say!’ Bomilcar winked to show that he meant no offence. ‘Time just passes us by, eh? How are you keeping?’

Hanno moved the hand holding the ring to his side. ‘I’m well. And you?’

‘Fine. Been to see the chief?’ Bomilcar jerked his head in the direction of Hannibal’s tent.

‘How did you guess?’

‘You had that look that men have after talking to him. Pensive,’ came the shrewd reply.

‘He’s sending me to Sicily,’ Hanno confided.

Bomilcar’s eyebrows rose. ‘You’re moving up in the world.’

‘It seems so.’ Hanno felt a little disappointed that Bomilcar did not ask more. ‘Have you also been summoned?’

A nod, then a whisper. ‘I’m to travel to Rome.’

How the world changed, thought Hanno. All he’d known since joining Hannibal’s army was fighting and battles. Now everything seemed to be about espionage and subterfuge. ‘As a spy, I take it?’

Bomilcar winked again. ‘I’m fair-skinned. Thanks to my years in captivity, I speak Latin like a native. Who better to venture into the wolf’s lair? There have been rumours of the enemy trying to force us down into the heel, or perhaps the toe of the peninsula. Hannibal wants me to find out if they’re true.’ Bomilcar cast a look at the sun. ‘Here, I’m late. Let’s share that cup of wine tonight. I’ll tell you more, and you can fill me in on your mission.’

‘I look forward to it,’ said Hanno, grinning.

By the time that he, Mutt and Bomilcar had consumed the contents of two small amphorae of wine, the moon had risen high in the night sky and

Hanno was feeling decidedly the worse for wear. A warm, fuzzy feeling encased him, and he felt goodwill towards all men. Well, not towards the Romans, he thought blearily, but even they weren't as bad as some made them out to be. He had spent more than a year living with Quintus and his family, had he not? They hadn't been any different to him and his own family. Not evil. Not perfect, but decent, hard-working people. It wasn't possible that they were different from the rest of their race. No, Hanno decided, many Romans were all right. Pera, the officer who had tortured him at Victumulae was an exception, clearly. The rest, however, just happened to be the enemy. A damn stubborn enemy too. 'Why couldn't the fools have admitted that they were beaten after Cannae?' he muttered.

'We should have marched on Rome then,' said Bomilcar. 'They would have surrendered.'

'Would they?' asked Mutt, letting out a contemptuous fart. He waited until the chuckles had died down before continuing. 'I don't think so. The only thing that will make them surrender is when every city, every ally they have, deserts them. When they're on their own, with their backs to the wall, they will sue for peace.'

'For that to happen, we need to defeat the enemy in both Iberia and Sicily,' said Hanno grimly, already feeling the pressure of his mission. 'That would free up two armies of ours to travel to Italy. Once they arrived, Rome's allies would desert them like rats escaping a sinking ship.'

'Aye, that's about right,' replied Mutt, taking a big mouthful from his cup.

When it hadn't happened after Cannae, Hanno had begun to suspect that the path to total victory would be long and tortuous. Articulated now, the prospect of winning a war on three fronts sounded close to impossible. Stop thinking like that, he ordered himself. 'We have to succeed, damn it!'

'We will pray to the gods and do our best. A man can do no more, eh?' Bomilcar held out his cup to Mutt for a refill.

That did not sit well with Hanno. Failure – or, at best, satisfaction with one's efforts – was not something that he ever wanted to feel comfortable with. It smacked of mediocrity. An image of Aurelia came into his mind

then, as she had been that night outside her home near Capua. His groin throbbed and for a moment, he forgot about Sicily, and duty. Shame at not having tried to contact her after their last meeting scourged him. Yet there had seemed no point. She was to be married, and they were from opposite sides in the war. The most practical thing would have been to try and forget her, yet Hanno hadn't. Couldn't. A wave of memories surged back. Gods, but how good it had been to kiss her. Why had he not sent her messages? They would never have got through, but he should have tried. Impulse seized him. He nudged Bomilcar. 'Will you pass through Capua on your way north?'

'It's the last friendly city before Rome, so yes, probably. Why?'

Hanno didn't answer immediately. He was being foolish, he thought sadly. Capua had come over to Hannibal some time since. Those who remained loyal to the Republic would have fled the city after that. He could not imagine Aurelia's mother and father, and by extension, her husband, ever changing sides. She would not be in Capua. He let out a heavy sigh. 'It doesn't matter.'

Bomilcar threw him a quizzical look, but said nothing. Mutt, on the other hand, chuckled knowingly. 'It'll be a woman. Mark my words.'

'What makes you think that?' Hanno demanded, worried that Mutt was about to mention his illegal forays before Cannae. Despite Bomilcar being a friend, the fewer who knew, the better.

Mutt gave him a glance as if to say, 'You don't need to worry.' He winked at Bomilcar, and then regarded Hanno. 'It's the look in your eyes, sir. You're like a moonstruck calf.'

Is it that obvious? wondered Hanno, grateful the darkness didn't reveal the colour of his cheeks.

'Who is she?' asked Bomilcar.

Damn it, thought Hanno, what did it matter if Bomilcar knew? It wasn't the act of a traitor to have feelings for a woman who happened to be one of the enemy. 'She's the sister of the Roman who bought me. Aurelia is her name.'

‘Is she pretty?’ Mutt’s face was eager.

‘Very.’ He pictured her as she’d been the night they had met at her family’s estate. Grown up – a woman, with woman’s curves. His erection stiffened, and he shifted position to hide it.

The others chuckled. ‘She must be good-looking, for you to remember her after this long,’ said Bomilcar.

Hanno was glad that Mutt didn’t say a word. He brooded on the fact that Aurelia would now have been married for some time. For all he knew, she had a child or two. It was all too possible that she had died in childbirth— Stop it. She’s alive, he told himself.

‘You want me to seek her out in Capua?’ asked Bomilcar in a low voice. ‘Give her a message?’

‘That’s good of you, but she won’t be there.’ Quickly, Hanno explained, before poking a stick into the fire in frustration.

‘Forget about her, sir. You’ll never see her again,’ advised Mutt. He raised his cup and gave it an appreciative caress. ‘Best give your love to this. You’ll never find a place where you can’t find some. Might be vinegary, or off, but it will still do the job.’

Hanno glared at Mutt. That’s what I thought when I escaped with Quintus, but then I *did* meet her once more. To extinguish the dream that he might do so again seemed too brutal. Everything else in his life was about war and death, and duty to Hannibal and Carthage. This one thing was his alone. ‘This is different,’ he muttered.

‘First love!’ said Mutt. ‘Oh, to be young again.’

Hanno threw the dregs from his cup over him.

Mutt shut up.

‘Tell me what you would say to Aurelia,’ urged Bomilcar. ‘I will try to find her in Capua. Even if I fail, I might hear word of where she has gone.’

Hanno sensed that Bomilcar was just humouring him, but he didn’t care. Was it not better that he carry a message of some kind – any kind – than nothing at all? His heart ached at the idea that Bomilcar might actually meet Aurelia. ‘Tell her . . . that I think of her often. Often. Tell her that

with the gods' help, we will see each other again one day . . .' His voice died away.

No one spoke. Hanno glanced at Mutt, saw sympathy in his eyes. Bomilcar's expression was also understanding. Even in the midst of a war, we don't have to be unfeeling, Hanno thought. He took a swig of wine and stared out into the blackness.

'If I find her, rest assured that I will tell her,' said Bomilcar.

'Thank you,' replied Hanno gruffly.

The knowledge would make his journey to Sicily that little bit easier.