

Hannibal: Enemy of Rome

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preface

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Chapter I: Hanno



Carthage, spring

‘**H**anno!’ His father’s voice echoed off the painted stucco walls. ‘It’s time to go.’

Stepping carefully over the gutter that carried liquid waste out to the soakaway in the street, Hanno looked back. He was torn between his duty and the urgent gestures of his friend, Suniaton. The political meetings his father had recently insisted he attend bored him to tears. Each one he’d been to followed exactly the same path. A group of self-important, bearded elders, clearly fond of the sound of their own voices, made interminable speeches about how Hannibal Barca’s actions in Iberia were exceeding the remit granted to him. Malchus – his father – and his closest allies, who supported Hannibal, said little or nothing until the greybeards had fallen silent, when they would stand forth one by one. Invariably, Malchus spoke last of all. His words seldom varied. Hannibal, who had been commander in Iberia for just three years, was doing an outstanding job in cementing Carthage’s hold over the wild native tribes, forming a disciplined army and, most importantly, filling the city’s coffers with the silver from his mines. Who else was pursuing such heroic and worthy endeavours while simultaneously enriching Carthage? In defending the tribes who had been attacked by Saguntum, a city allied to Rome, he was merely reinforcing their people’s sovereignty in Iberia. On these grounds, the young Barca should be left to his own devices.

Hanno knew that what motivated the politicians was fear, partly assuaged by the thought of Hannibal’s forces, and greed, partly satisfied by the shiploads of precious metal from Iberia. Malchus’ carefully chosen words therefore normally swayed the Senate in Hannibal’s favour, but only after

endless hours of debate. The interminable politicking made Hanno want to scream, and to tell the old fools what he really thought of them. Of course he would never shame his father in that manner, but nor could he face yet another day stuck indoors. The idea of a fishing trip held too much appeal.

One of Hannibal's messengers regularly came to bring his father news from Iberia, and had visited not a week since. The night-time rendezvous were supposed to be a secret, but Hanno had soon come to recognise the cloaked, sallow-skinned officer. Sapho and Bostar, his older brothers, had been allowed to stand in on the meetings for some time. Swearing Hanno to secrecy, Bostar had filled him in afterwards. Now, if he was able, Hanno simply eavesdropped. In a nutshell, Hannibal had charged Malchus and his allies with the task of ensuring that the politicians continued to back his actions. A showdown with the city of Saguntum was imminent, but conflict with Rome, Carthage's old enemy, was some way off yet.

The deep, gravelly voice called out again, echoing down the corridor that led to the central courtyard. There was a hint of annoyance in it now. 'Hanno? We'll be late.'

Hanno froze. He wasn't afraid of the dressing down his father would deliver later, more of the disappointed look in his eyes. A scion of one of Carthage's oldest families, Malchus led by example, and expected his three sons to do the same. At seventeen, Hanno was the youngest. He was also the one who most often failed to meet these exacting standards. For some reason, Malchus expected more of him than he did of Sapho and Bostar. At least that's how it seemed to Hanno. Yet farming, the traditional source of their wealth, interested him little. Warfare, his father's preferred vocation, and Hanno's great fascination, was barred to him still, thanks to his youth. His brothers would be sailing for Iberia any day. There, no doubt, they would cover themselves in glory in the taking of Saguntum. Frustration and resentment filled Hanno. All he could do was practise his riding and weapons skills. Life as ordained by his father was so boring, he thought, choosing to ignore Malchus' oft-repeated statement: 'Be patient. All good things come to those who wait.'

'Come on!' urged Suniaton, thumping Hanno on the arm. His gold earrings jingled as he jerked his head in the direction of the harbour. 'The

fishermen found huge shoals of tunny in the bay at dawn. With Melqart's blessing, the fish won't have moved far. We'll catch dozens. Think of the money to be made!' His voice dropped to a whisper. 'I've taken an amphora of wine from Father's cellar. We can share it on the boat.'

Unable to resist his friend's offer, Hanno blocked his ears to Malchus' voice, which was coming closer. Tunny was one of the most prized fish in the Mediterranean. If the shoals were close to shore, this was an opportunity too good to miss. Stepping into the rutted street, he glanced once more at the symbol etched into the stone slab before the flat-roofed house's entrance. An inverted triangle topped by a flat line and then a circle, it represented his people's pre-eminent deity. Few dwellings were without it. Hanno asked Tanit's forgiveness for disobeying his father's wishes, but his excitement was such that he forgot to ask for the mother goddess's protection.

'Hanno!' His father's voice was very near now.

Without further ado, the two young men darted off into the crowd. Both their families dwelled near the top of Byrsa Hill. At the summit, reached by a monumental staircase of sixty steps, was an immense temple dedicated to Eshmoun, the god of fertility, health and well-being. Suniaton lived with his family in the sprawling complex behind the shrine, where his father served as a priest. Named in honour of the deity, Eshmuniaton – abbreviated to Suniaton or simply Suni – was Hanno's oldest and closest friend. The pair had scarcely spent a day out of each other's company since they were old enough to walk.

The rest of the neighbourhood was primarily residential. Byrsa was one of the richer quarters, as its wide, straight thoroughfares and right-angled intersections proved. The majority of the city's winding streets were no more than ten paces across, but here they averaged more than twice this width. In addition to wealthy merchants and senior army officers, the suffetes – judges – and many elders also called the area home. For this reason, Hanno ran with his gaze directed at the packed earth and the regular soak-away holes beneath his feet. Plenty of people knew who he was. The last thing he wanted was to be stopped and challenged by one of Malchus' numerous political opponents. To be dragged back home by the ear would be embarrassing and bring dishonour to his family.

As long as they didn't catch anyone's eye, he and his friend would pass unnoticed. Bare-headed and wearing tight-fitting red woollen singlets,

with a central white stripe and a distinctive wide neckband, and breeches that reached to the knee, the pair looked no different to other well-to-do youths. Their garb was far more practical than the long straight wool tunics and conical felt hats favoured by most adult men, and more comfortable than the ornate jacket and pleated apron worn by those of Cypriot extraction. Sheathed daggers hung from simple leather straps thrown over their shoulders. Suniaton carried a bulging pack on his back.

Although people said that they could pass for brothers, Hanno couldn't see it most of the time. While he was tall and athletic, Suniaton was short and squat. Naturally, they both had tightly curled black hair and a dark complexion, but there the resemblance ended. Hanno's face was thin, with a straight nose and high cheekbones, while his friend's round visage and snub nose were complemented by a jutting chin. They did both have green eyes, Hanno conceded. That feature, unusual among the brown-eyed Carthaginians, was probably why they were thought to be siblings.

A step ahead of him, Suniaton nearly collided with a carpenter carrying several long cypress planks. Rather than apologise, he thumbed his nose and sprinted towards the citadel walls, now only a hundred paces away. Stifling his desire to finish the job by tipping over the angry tradesman, Hanno dodged past too, a grin splitting his face. Another similarity he and Suniaton shared was an impudent nature, quite at odds with the serious manner of most of their countrymen. It frequently got both of them in trouble, and was a constant source of irritation to their fathers.

A moment later, they passed under the immense ramparts, which were thirty paces deep and nearly the same in height. Like the outer defences, the wall was constructed from great quadrilateral blocks of sandstone. Frequent coats of whitewash ensured that the sunlight bounced off the stone, magnifying its size. Topped by a wide walkway and with regular towers, the fortifications were truly awe-inspiring. Yet the citadel was only a small part of the whole. Hanno never tired of looking down on the expanse of the sea wall that came into view as he emerged from under the gateway's shadow. Running down from the north along the city's perimeter, it swept southeast to the twin harbours, curling protectively around them before heading west. On the steep northern and eastern sides, and to the south, where the sea gave its added protection, one wall was deemed sufficient, but on the western, landward side of the peninsula, three defences

had been constructed: a wide trench backed by an earthen bank, and then a huge rampart. The walls, which were in total over 180 stades in length, also contained sections with two-tiered living quarters. These could hold many thousands of troops, cavalry and their mounts, and hundreds of war elephants.

Home to nearly a quarter of a million people, the city also demanded attention. Directly below lay the Agora, the large open space bordered by government buildings and countless shops. It was the area where residents gathered to do business, demonstrate, take the evening air, and vote. Beyond it lay the unique ports: the huge outer, rectangular merchant harbour, and the inner, circular naval docks with its small, central island. The first contained hundreds of berths for trading ships, while the second could hold more than ten-score triremes and quinqueremes in specially constructed covered sheds. To the west of the ports was the old shrine of Baal Hammon, no longer as important as it had previously been, but still venerated by many. To the east lay the Choma, the huge man-made landing stage where fishing smacks and small vessels tied up. It was also their destination.

Hanno was immensely proud of his home. He had no idea what Rome, Carthage's old enemy, looked like, but he doubted it matched his city's grandeur. He had no desire to compare Carthage with the Republic's capital, though. The only view he ever wanted of Rome was when it fell – to a victorious Carthaginian army – before seeing it burned to the ground. As Hamilcar Barca, Hannibal's father, had inculcated a hatred of all things Roman in his sons, so had Malchus in Hanno and his brothers. Like Hamilcar, Malchus had served in the first war against the Republic, fighting in Sicily for ten long, thankless years.

Unsurprisingly, Hanno and his siblings knew the details of every land skirmish and naval battle in the conflict, which had actually lasted for more than a generation. The cost to Carthage in loss of life, territory and wealth had been huge, but the city's wounds ran far deeper. Her pride had been trampled in the mud by the defeat, and this ignominy was repeated just three years after the war's conclusion. Carthage had been unilaterally forced by Rome to give up Sardinia, as well as paying more indemnities. The shabby act proved beyond doubt, Malchus would regularly rant, that all Romans were treacherous dogs, without honour. Hanno agreed, and looked forward to the day hostilities were reopened once more. Given the depth

of anger still present in Carthage towards Rome, conflict was inevitable, and it would originate in Iberia. Soon.

Suniaton turned. 'Have you eaten?'

Hanno shrugged. 'Some bread and honey when I got up.'

'Me too. That was hours ago, though.' Suniaton grinned and patted his belly. 'Best get a few supplies.'

'Good idea,' Hanno replied. They kept clay gourds of water in their little boat with their fishing gear, but no food. Sunset, when they would return, was a long way off.

The streets descending Byrsa Hill did not follow the regular layout of the summit, instead radiating out like so many tributaries of a meandering river. There were far more shops and businesses visible now: bakers, butchers and stalls selling freshly caught fish, fruit and vegetables stood beside silver- and coppersmiths, perfume merchants and glass blowers. Women sat outside their doors, working at their looms, or gossiping over their purchases. Slaves carried rich men past in litters or swept the ground in front of shops. Dye-makers' premises were everywhere, their abundance due to the Carthaginian skill in harvesting the local *Murex* shellfish and pounding its flesh to yield a purple dye that commanded premium prices all over the Mediterranean. Children ran hither and thither, playing catch and chasing each other up and down the regular sets of stairs that broke the street's steep descent. Deep in conversation, a trio of well-dressed men strolled past. Recognising them as elders, who were probably on their way to the very meeting he was supposed to be attending, Hanno took a sudden interest in the array of terracotta outside a potter's workshop.

Dozens of figures – large and small – were ranked on low tables. Hanno recognised every deity in the Carthaginian pantheon. There sat a regal, crowned Baal Hammon, the protector of Carthage, on his throne; beside him Tanit was depicted in the Egyptian manner: a shapely woman's body in a well-cut dress, but with the head of a lioness. A smiling Astarte clutched a tambourine. Her consort, Melqart, known as the 'King of the City', was, among other things, the god of the sea. Various brightly coloured figures depicted him emerging from crashing waves riding a fearful-looking monster and clutching a trident in one fist. Baal Saphon, the god of storm and war, sat astride a fine charger, wearing a helmet with a long, flowing

crest. Also on display was a selection of hideous, grinning painted masks – tattooed, bejewelled demons and spirits of the underworld – tomb offerings designed to ward off evil.

Hanno shivered, remembering his mother's funeral three years before. Since her death of a fever his father, never the most warm of men, had become a grim and forbidding presence who lived only to gain his revenge on Rome. For all his youth, Hanno knew that Malchus was portraying a controlled mask to the world. He must still be grieving, as surely as he and his brothers were. Arishat, Hanno's mother, had been the light to Malchus' dark, the laughter to his gravitas, the softness to his strength. The centre of the family, she had been taken from them in two horrific days and nights. Harangued by an inconsolable Malchus, the best surgeons in Carthage had toiled over her to no avail. Every last detail of her final hours was engraved in Hanno's memory. The cups of blood drained from her in a vain attempt to cool her raging temperature. Her gaunt, fevered face. The sweat-soaked sheets. His brothers trying not to cry, and failing. And lastly, her still form on the bed, tinier than she had ever been in life. Malchus kneeling alongside, great sobs racking his muscular frame. That was the only time Hanno had ever seen his father weep. The incident had never been mentioned since, nor had his mother. He swallowed hard and, checking that the elders had passed by, moved on. It hurt too much to think about such things.

Suniaton, who had not noticed Hanno's distress, paused to buy some bread, almonds and figs. Keen to lift his sombre mood, Hanno eyed the blacksmith's forge off to one side. Wisps of smoke rose from its roughly built chimney, and the air was rich with the smells of charcoal, burning wood and oil. Harsh metallic sounds reached his ears. In the recesses of the open-fronted establishment, he glimpsed a figure in a leather apron using a pair of tongs to carefully lift a piece of glowing metal from the anvil. There was a loud hiss as the sword blade was plunged into a vat of cold water. Hanno felt his feet begin to move.

Suniaton blocked his path. 'We've got better things to do. Like making money,' he cried, shoving forward a bulging bag of almonds. 'Carry that.'

'No! You'll eat them all anyway.' Hanno pushed his friend out of the way with a grin. It was a standing joke between them that his favourite pastime was getting covered in ash and grime while Suniaton would rather plan his next meal. He was so busy laughing that he didn't see the

approaching group of soldiers – a dozen Libyan spearmen – until it was too late. With a thump, Hanno collided with the first man’s large, round shield.

This was no street urchin, and the spearman bit back an instinctive curse. ‘Mind your step,’ he cried.

Catching sight of two Carthaginian officers in the soldiers’ midst, Hanno cursed. It was Sapho and Bostar. Both were dressed in their finest uniforms. Bell-shaped helmets with thick rims and yellow-feathered crests covered their heads. Layered linen *pteryges* hung below their polished bronze cuirasses to cover the groin, and contoured greaves protected their lower legs. No doubt they too were on their way to the meeting. Muttering an apology to the spearman, Hanno backed away, looking at the ground in an attempt not to be recognised.

Oblivious to Sapho and Bostar’s presence, Suniaton was snorting with amusement at Hanno’s collision. ‘Come on,’ he urged. ‘We don’t want to get there too late.’

‘Hanno!’ Bostar’s voice was genial.

He pretended not to hear.

‘Hanno! Come back!’ barked a deeper, more commanding voice, that of Sapho.

Unwillingly, Hanno turned.

Suniaton tried to sidle away, but he had also been spotted.

‘Eshmuniaton! Get over here,’ Sapho ordered.

With a miserable expression, Suniaton shuffled to his friend’s side.

Hanno’s brothers shouldered their way forward to stand before them.

‘Sapho. Bostar,’ Hanno said with a false smile. ‘What a surprise.’

‘Is it?’ Sapho demanded, his thick eyebrows meeting in a frown. A short, compact man with a serious manner like Malchus, he was twenty-two. Young to be a mid-ranking officer, but like Bostar, his ability had shone through during his training. ‘We’re all supposed to be heading to listen to the elders. Why aren’t you with Father?’

Flushing, Hanno looked down. Damn it, he thought. In Sapho’s eyes, duty to Carthage was all-important. In a single moment, their chances of a day on the boat had vanished.

Sapho gave Suniaton a hard stare, taking in his pack and the provisions in his hands. ‘Because the pair of you were skiving off, that’s why! Fishing, no doubt?’

Suniaton scuffed a toe in the dirt.

‘Cat got your tongue?’ Sapho asked acidly.

Hanno moved in front of his friend. ‘We were going to catch some tunny, yes,’ he admitted.

Sapho’s scowl grew deeper. ‘And that’s more important than listening to the Council of Elders?’

As usual, his brother’s high-handed attitude rankled with Hanno. This type of lecture was all too common. Most often, it felt as if Sapho was trying to be their father. Unsurprisingly, Hanno resented this. ‘It’s not as if the greybeards will say anything that hasn’t been said a thousand times before,’ he retorted. ‘Just about every one is full of hot air.’

Suniaton sniggered. ‘Like someone else not too far away.’ He saw Hanno’s warning look and fell silent.

Sapho’s jaw clenched. ‘You pair of impudent—’ he began.

Bostar’s lips twitched, and he lifted a hand to Sapho’s shoulder. ‘Peace,’ he said. ‘Hanno has a point. The elders *are* rather fond of the sound of their own voices.’

Hanno and Suniaton tried to hide their smiles.

Sapho missed Bostar’s amusement, but he lapsed into a glowering silence. He was acutely aware, and resentful, that he was not the senior officer present. Although Sapho was a year older, Bostar had been promoted before him.

‘It’s not as if this meeting will be a matter of life and death,’ Bostar continued reasonably. His wink – unseen by Sapho – told Hanno that all hope was not lost. He slyly returned the gesture. Like Hanno, Bostar resembled their mother, Arishat, with a thin face and piercing green eyes. Where Sapho’s nose was broad, his was long and narrow. Rangy and athletic, his long black hair was tied in a ponytail, which emerged from under his helmet. Hanno had far more in common with the gentle Bostar than he did with Sapho. Currently, his feelings for his eldest brother often verged on dislike. ‘Does our father know where you are?’

‘No,’ admitted Hanno.

Bostar turned to Suniaton. ‘I would assume, therefore, that Bodesmun is also in the dark?’

‘Of course he is,’ Sapho butted in, eager to regain control. ‘As usual where these two are concerned.’

Bostar ignored his brother’s outburst. ‘Well?’

‘Father thinks I’m at home, studying,’ Suniaton revealed.

Sapho’s expression grew a shade more self-righteous. ‘Let’s see what Bodesmun and Father have to say when they discover what you were both really up to. We have enough time to do that before the Council meets.’ He jerked a thumb at the spearmen. ‘Get in amongst them.’

Hanno scowled, but there was little point arguing. Sapho was in a particularly zealous mood. ‘Come on,’ he muttered to Suniaton. ‘The shoals will be there another day.’

Before they could move a step, Bostar spoke. ‘I don’t see why they shouldn’t go fishing.’

Hanno and Suniaton stared at each other, amazed.

Sapho’s brows rose. ‘What do you mean?’

‘Such activities will shortly be impossible for both of us, and we’ll miss them.’ Bostar made a face. ‘That same day will come for Hanno soon enough. Let him have his fun while he can.’

Hanno’s heart leaped; the gravity of Bostar’s words was lost on him.

Sapho’s face grew thoughtful. After a moment, though, his sanctimonious frown returned. ‘Duty is duty,’ he declared.

‘Lighten up, Sapho. You’re twenty-two, not fifty-two!’ Bostar threw a glance at the spearmen, who were uniformly grinning. ‘Who would notice Hanno’s absence apart from us and Father? And you’re not Suni’s keeper any more than I am.’

Sapho’s lips thinned at the teasing, but he relented. The idea of Bostar pulling rank on him was too much to bear. ‘Father won’t be happy,’ he said gruffly, ‘but I suppose you’re right.’

Hanno could hardly believe what he was hearing. ‘Thank you!’ His cry was echoed by Suniaton.

‘Go on, before I change my mind,’ Sapho warned.

The friends didn’t need any further prompting. With a grateful look at Bostar, who threw them another wink, the pair disappeared into the crowd. Broad grins creased both their faces. They would still be held to account, thought Hanno, but not until that evening. Visions of a boat full of tunny filled his mind once more.

‘Sapho’s a serious one, isn’t he?’ Suniaton commented.

‘You know how he is,’ Hanno replied. ‘In his eyes, things like fishing are a waste of time.’

Suniaton nudged him. ‘Just as well I didn’t tell him what I was thinking, then.’ He grinned at Hanno’s enquiring look. ‘That it would do him good to relax more – perhaps by going fishing!’

Hanno’s mouth opened with shock, before he laughed. ‘Thank the gods you didn’t say that! There’s no way he would have let us go.’

Smiling with relief, the friends continued their journey. Soon they had reached the Agora. Its four sides, each a stade in length, were made up of grand porticoes and covered walkways. The beating heart of the city, it was home to the building where the Council of Elders met, as well as government offices, a library, numerous temples and shops. It was also where, on summer evenings, the better-off young men and women would gather in groups, a safe distance apart, to eye each other up. Socialising with the opposite sex was frowned upon, and chaperones for the girls were never far away. Despite this, inventive methods to approach the object of one’s desire were constantly being invented. Of recent months, this had become one of the friends’ favourite pastimes. Fishing beat it still, but not by much, thought Hanno wistfully, scanning the crowds for any sign of attractive female flesh.

Instead of gaggles of coy young beauties, though, the Agora was full of serious-looking politicians, merchants and high-ranking soldiers. They were heading for one place. The central edifice, within the hallowed walls of which more than three hundred elders met on a regular basis as, for nearly half a millennium, their predecessors had done. Overseen by the two *suffetes* – the rulers elected every year – they, the most important men in Carthage, decided everything from trading policy to negotiations with foreign states. Their range of powers did not end there. The Council of Elders also had the power to declare war and peace, even though it no longer appointed the army’s generals. Since the war with Rome, that had been left to the people. The only prerequisites for candidature of the council were citizenship, wealth, an age of thirty or more, and the demonstration of ability, whether in the agricultural, mercantile, or military fields.

Ordinary citizens could participate in politics via the Assembly of the People, which congregated once a year, by the order of the *suffetes*, in the Agora. During times of great crisis, it was permitted to gather spontaneously and debate the issues of the day. While its powers were limited, they included electing the *suffetes* and the generals. Hanno was looking

forward to the next meeting, which would be the first he'd attend as an adult, entitled to vote. Although Hannibal's enormous public popularity guaranteed his reappointment as the commander-in-chief of Carthage's forces in Iberia, Hanno wanted to show his support for the Barca clan. It was the only way he could at the moment. Despite his requests, Malchus would not let him join Hannibal's army, as Sapho and Bostar had done after their mother's death. Instead, he had to finish his education. There was no point fighting his father on this. Once Malchus had spoken, he never went back on a decision.

Following Carthaginian tradition, Hanno had largely fended for himself from the age of fourteen, although he continued to sleep at home. He'd worked in a forge, among other places, and thus earned enough to live on without committing any crimes or shameful acts. This was similar to, but not as harsh, as the Spartan way. He had also taken classes in Greek, Iberian and Latin. Hanno did not especially enjoy languages, but he had come to accept that such a skill would prove useful among the polyglot of nationalities that formed the Carthaginian army. His people did not take naturally to war, so they hired mercenaries, or enlisted their subjects, to fight on their behalf. Libyans, Iberians, Gauls and Balearic tribesmen were among those who brought their differing qualities to Carthage's forces.

Hanno's favourite subject was military matters. Malchus himself taught him the history of war, from the battles of Xenophon and Thermopylae to the victories won by Alexander of Macedon. Central to his father's lessons were the intricate details of tactics and planning. Particular attention was paid to Carthaginian defeats in the war with Rome, and the reasons for them. 'We lost because of our leaders' lack of determination. All they thought about was how to contain the conflict, not win it. How to minimise cost, not disregard it in the total pursuit of victory,' Malchus had thundered during one memorable lesson. 'The Romans are motherless curs, but by all the gods, they possess strength of purpose. Whenever they lost a battle, they recruited more men, and rebuilt their ships. They did not give up. When the public purse was empty, their leaders willingly spent their own wealth. Their damn Republic means everything to them. Yet who in Carthage offered to send us the supplies and soldiers we needed so badly in Sicily? My father, the Barcas, and a handful of others. No one else.' He'd barked a short, angry laugh. 'Why should I be surprised? Our

ancestors were traders, not soldiers. To gain our rightful revenge, we must follow Hannibal. He's a natural soldier and a born leader – as his father was. Carthage never gave Hamilcar the chance to beat Rome, but we can offer it to his son. When the time is right.'

A red-faced, portly senator shoved past with a curse. Startled, Hanno recognised Hostus, one of his father's most implacable enemies. The self-important politician was in such a hurry that he didn't even notice whom he'd collided with. Hanno hawked and spat, although he was careful not to do it in Hostus' direction. He and his windbag friends complained endlessly about Hannibal, yet were content to accept the shiploads of silver sent from his mines in Iberia. Lining their own pockets with a proportion of this wealth, they had no desire to confront Rome again. Hanno, on the other hand, was more than prepared to lay down his life fighting their old enemy, but the fruit of revenge wasn't ripe. Hannibal was preparing himself in Iberia, and that was good enough. For now, they had to wait.

The pair skirted the edge of the Agora, avoiding the worst of the crowds. Around the back of the Senate, the buildings soon became a great deal less grand, looking as shabby as one would expect close to a port. Nonetheless, the slum stood in stark contrast to the splendour just a short walk away. There were few businesses, and the single- or twin-roomed houses were miserable affairs made of mud bricks, all apparently on the point of collapse. The iron-hard ruts in the street were more than a handspan deep, threatening to break their ankles if they tripped. No work parties to fill in the holes with sand here, thought Hanno, thinking of Byrsa Hill. He felt even more grateful for his elevated position in life.

Snot-nosed, scrawny children wearing little more than rags swarmed in, clamouring for a coin or a crust, while their lank-haired, pregnant mothers gazed at them with eyes deadened by a life of misery. Half-dressed girls posed provocatively in some doorways, their rouged cheeks and lips unable to conceal the fact that they were barely out of childhood. Unshaven, ill-clad men lounged around, rolling sheep tail bones in the dirt for a few worn coins. They stared suspiciously, but none dared hinder the friends' progress. At night it might be a different matter, but already they were under the shadow of the great wall, with its smartly turned-out sentries marching to and fro along the battlements. Although common, lawlessness

was punished where possible by the authorities, and a shout of distress would bring help clattering down one of the many sets of stairs.

The tang of salt grew strong in the air. Gulls keened overhead, and the shouts of sailors could be heard from the ports. Feeling his excitement grow, Hanno charged down a narrow alleyway, and up the stone steps at the end of it. Suniaton was right behind him. It was a steep climb, but they were both fit, and reached the top without breaking sweat. A red concrete walkway extended the entire width of the wall – thirty paces – just as it did for the entire length of the defensive perimeter. Strongly built towers were positioned every fifty steps or so. The soldiers visible were garrisoned in the barracks, which were built at intervals below the ramparts.

The nearest sentries, a quartet of Libyan spearmen, glanced idly at the pair but, seeing nothing of concern, looked away. In peacetime, citizens were allowed on the wall during the hours of daylight. Perfunctorily checking the turquoise sea below their section, the junior officer fell back to gossiping with his men. Hanno trotted past, admiring the soldiers' massive round shields, which were even larger than those used by the Greeks. Although fashioned from wood, they were covered in goatskin, and rimmed with bronze. The same demonic face was painted on each, and denoted their unit.

Trumpets blared one after another from the naval port, and Suniaton jostled past. 'Quick,' he shouted. 'They might be launching a quinquereme!'

Hanno chased eagerly after his friend. The view from the walkway into the circular harbour was second to none. In a masterful feat of engineering, the Carthaginian warships were invisible from all other positions. Protected from unfriendly eyes on the seaward side by the city wall, they were concealed from the moored merchant vessels by the naval port's slender entrance, which was only just wider than a quinquereme, the largest type of warship.

Hanno scowled as they reached a good vantage point. Instead of the imposing sight of a warship sliding backwards into the water, he saw a purple-cloaked admiral strutting along the jetty that led from the periphery of the circular docks to the central island, where the navy's headquarters were. Another fanfare of trumpets sounded, making sure that every man in the place knew who was arriving. 'What has he got to swagger about?' Hanno muttered. Malchus reserved much of his anger for the incompetent

Carthaginian fleet, so he had learned to feel the same way. Carthage's days as a superpower of the sea were long gone, their fleet smashed into so much driftwood by Rome during the two nations' bitter struggle over Sicily. Remarkably, the Romans had been a non-seafaring race before the conflict. Undeterred by this major disadvantage, they had learned the skills of naval warfare, adding a few tricks of their own in the process. Since her defeat, Carthage had done little to reclaim the waves.

Hanno sighed. Truly, all their hopes lay on the land, with Hannibal.

Some time later, Hanno had forgotten all his worries. Half a mile offshore, their little boat was positioned directly over a mass of tunny. The shoal's location had not been hard to determine, thanks to the roiling water created by the large silver fish as they hunted sardines. Small boats dotted the location and clouds of seabirds swooped and dived overhead, attracted by the prospect of food. Suniaton's source had been telling the truth, and neither youth had been able to stop grinning since their arrival. Their task was simple: one rowed, the other lowered their net into the sea. Although they had seen better days, the plaited strands were still capable of landing a catch. Pieces of wood along the top of the net helped it to float, while tiny lumps of lead pulled its lower edge down into the water. Their first throw had netted nearly a dozen tunny, each one longer than a man's forearm. Subsequent attempts were just as successful, and now the bottom of the boat was calf-deep in fish. Any more, and they would risk overloading their craft.

'A good morning's work,' pronounced Suniaton.

'Morning?' challenged Hanno, squinting at the sun. 'We've been here less than an hour. It couldn't have been easier, eh?'

Suniaton regarded him solemnly. 'Don't put yourself down. I think our efforts deserve a toast.' With a flourish, he produced a small amphora from his pack.

Hannibal laughed; Suniaton was incorrigible.

Encouraged, Suniaton went on talking as if he were serving guests at an important banquet. 'Not the most expensive wine in Father's collection, I recall, but a palatable one nonetheless.' Using his knife, he prised off the wax seal and removed the lid. Raising the amphora to his lips, he gulped a large mouthful. 'Acceptable,' he declared, handing over the clay vessel.

‘Philistine. Sip it slowly.’ Hanno took a small swig and rolled it around his mouth as Malchus had taught him. The red wine had a light and fruity flavour, but little undertone. ‘It needs a few more years, I think.’

‘Now who’s being pompous?’ Suniaton kicked a tunny at him. ‘Shut up and drink!’

Grinning, Hanno obeyed, taking more this time.

‘Don’t finish it,’ cried Suniaton.

Despite his protest, the amphora was quickly drained. At once the ravenous pair launched into the bread, nuts and fruit that Suniaton had bought. With their bellies full, and their work done, it was the most natural thing in the world to lie back and close their eyes. Unaccustomed to consuming much wine, before long they were both snoring.

It was the cold wind on his face that woke Hanno. Why was the boat moving so much? he wondered vaguely. He shivered, feeling quite chilled. Opening gummy eyes, he took in a prone Suniaton opposite, still clutching the empty amphora. At his feet, the heaps of blank-eyed fish, their bodies already rigid. Looking up, Hanno felt a pang of fear. Instead of the usual clear sky, all he could see were towering banks of blue-black clouds. They were pouring in from the northwest. He blinked, refusing to believe what he was seeing. How could the weather have changed so fast? Mockingly, the first spatters of rain hit Hanno’s upturned cheeks an instant later. Scanning the choppy waters, he could see no sign of the fishing craft that had surrounded theirs earlier. Nor could he see the land. Real alarm seized him.

He leaned over and shook Suniaton. ‘Wake up!’

The only response was an irritated grunt.

‘Sun!’ This time, Hanno slapped his friend across the face.

‘Hey!’ Suniaton cried, sitting up. ‘What’s that for?’

Hanno didn’t answer. ‘Where in the name of the gods are we?’ he shouted.

All semblance of drunkenness fell away as Suniaton turned his head from side to side. ‘Sacred Tanit above,’ he breathed. ‘How long were we asleep?’

‘I don’t know,’ Hanno growled. ‘A long time.’ He pointed to the west, where the sun’s light was just visible behind the storm clouds. Its position

told them that it was late in the afternoon. He stood, taking great care not to capsize the boat. Focusing on the horizon, where the sky met the threatening sea, he spent long moments trying to make out the familiar walls of Carthage, or the craggy promontory that lay to the north of the city.

‘Well?’ Suniaton could not keep the fear from his voice.

Hanno sat down heavily. ‘I can’t see a thing. We’re fifteen or twenty stades from shore. Maybe more.’

What little colour there had been in Suniaton’s face drained away. Instinctively, he clutched at the hollow gold tube that hung from a thong around his neck. Decorated with a lion’s head at one end, it contained tiny parchments covered with protective spells and prayers to the gods. Hanno wore a similar one. With great effort, he refrained from copying his friend. ‘We’ll row back,’ he announced.

‘In these seas?’ screeched Suniaton. ‘Are you mad?’

Hanno glared back. ‘What other choice have we? To jump in?’

His friend looked down. Both were more confident in the water than most, but they had never swum long distances, especially in conditions as bad as these.

Seizing the oars from the floor, Hanno placed them in the iron rowlocks. He turned the boat’s rounded bow towards the west and began to row. Instantly, he knew that his attempt was doomed to fail. The power surging at him was more potent than anything he’d ever felt in his life. It felt like a raging, out-of-control beast, with the howling wind providing its terrifying voice. Ignoring his gut feeling, Hanno concentrated on each stroke with fierce intensity. Lean back. Drag the oars through the water. Lift them free. Bend forward, pushing the handles between his knees. Over and over he repeated the process, ignoring his pounding head and dry mouth, and cursing their foolishness in drinking all of the wine. If I had listened to my father, I’d still be at home, he thought bitterly. Safe on dry land.

Finally, when the muscles in his arms were trembling with exhaustion, Hanno stopped. Without looking up, he knew that their position would have changed little. For every three strokes’ progress, the current carried them at least two further out to sea. ‘Well?’ he shouted. ‘Can you see anything?’

‘No,’ Suniaton replied grimly. ‘Move over. It’s my turn, and this is our best chance.’

Our last chance, Hanno thought, gazing at the darkening sky.

Gingerly, they exchanged places on the little wooden thwarts that were the boat's only fittings. Thanks to the mass of slippery fish underfoot, it was even more difficult than usual. While his friend laboured at the oars, Hanno strained for a glimpse of land over the waves. Neither spoke. There was no point. The rain was now drumming down on their backs, combining with the wind's noise to form a shrieking cacophony that made normal speech impossible. Only the sturdy construction of their boat had prevented them from capsizing thus far.

At length, his energy spent, Suniaton shipped the oars. He looked at Hanno. There was a glimmer of hope in his eyes.

Hanno shook his head once.

'It's supposed to be the summer!' Suniaton cried. 'Gales like this shouldn't happen without warning.'

'There would have been signs,' Hanno snapped back. 'Why do you think there are no other boats out here? They must have headed for the shore when the wind began to get up.'

Suniaton flushed and hung his head. 'I'm sorry,' he muttered. 'It's my fault. I should never have taken Father's wine.'

Hanno gripped his friend's knee. 'Don't blame yourself. You didn't force me to drink it. That was my choice.'

Suniaton managed a half-smile. That was, until he looked down. 'No!'

Hanno followed his gaze and saw the tunny floating around his feet. They were shipping water, and enough of it to warrant immediate action. Trying not to panic, he began throwing the precious fish overboard. Survival was far more important than money. With the floor clear, he soon found a loose nail in one of the planks. Removing one of his sandals, he used the iron-studded sole to hammer the nail partially home, thereby reducing the influx of seawater. Fortunately, there was a small bucket on board, containing spare pieces of lead for the net. Grabbing it, Hanno began bailing hard. To his immense relief, it didn't take long before he'd reduced the water to an acceptable level.

A loud rumble of thunder overhead nearly deafened him.

Suniaton moaned with fear, and Hanno jerked upright.

The sky overhead was now a menacing black colour, and in the depths of the clouds a flickering yellow-white colour presaged lightning. The

waves were being whipped into a frenzy by the wind, which was growing stronger by the moment. The storm was approaching its peak. More water slopped into the boat, and Hanno redoubled his efforts with the bucket. Any chance of rowing back to Carthage was long gone. They were going one direction. East. Into the middle of the Mediterranean. He tried not to let his panic show.

‘What’s going to happen to us?’ Suniaton asked plaintively.

Realising that his friend was seeking reassurance, Hanno tried to think of an optimistic answer, but couldn’t. The only outcome possible was an early meeting for them both with Melqart, the marine god.

In his palace at the bottom of the sea.