

# Hannibal: Fields of Blood

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preface

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## Chapter I



Cisalpine Gaul, winter

For the most part, the ground was flat, agricultural land that supplied grain for the nearby town. Green shoots of wheat a handsbreadth high were the only flash of colour in the frozen fields. Everything else had been turned silver-white by a heavy frost. The lowering clouds provided little contrast. Nor did the walls of Victumulae, which reared up, grey and imposing, in the distance. By the side of the road that ran to the gates lay a small, unremarkable copse.

Standing in the trees was a tall, rangy figure in a wool cloak. He had a thin face with a crooked nose and startlingly green eyes. Black curls escaped from the felt liner covering his head. His gaze darted restlessly over the terrain, but he saw nothing. It had been the same since he'd sent the sentry off to get some food. Hanno hadn't been watching for long, but already his feet were numb. He mouthed a curse. The cold wasn't going to go away. The ice was showing no signs of melting; nor had it for several days. A pang of homesickness. It was a different world from his childhood home on the north African coast, which he hadn't seen for almost two years. He could still picture the massive sandstone walls of Carthage, painted with whitewash so that the sunlight bounced off them. The magnificent Agora and, beyond it, the elaborate twin harbours. He sighed. Even in winter, his city was quite warm. And the sun shone most days, whereas here the only sign he had seen of it for a week was an occasional glimpse of a pale yellow disc through gaps in the murk overhead.

*Peee-ay. Peee-ay.* The characteristic cry made Hanno's head lift. Against the dull grey-white of the cloud, a couple of jackdaws jinked and turned,

pursuing a hungry, and angry, buzzard. The familiar sight – the small birds harassing the larger one – felt ironic. Our task is far harder than theirs, he thought grimly. To learn that Carthage is its master, Rome has to bleed as it never has before. Once, Hanno would have doubted that could ever happen. His people had been decisively beaten by the Republic before in a bitter, drawn-out war that had ended a generation previously. The conflict had left a hatred of Rome in every Carthaginian's heart, but there had seemed no way of winning redress from the enemy. In the last month, however, the world had been turned on its head.

Only a madman would have believed that an army could be led hundreds of miles from Iberia to Cisalpine Gaul, crossing the Alps as winter began. Yet, driven by his desire to defeat Rome, Hannibal Barca had done just that. Strengthened by an alliance with local tribes, Hanno's general had smashed the large Roman force that had been sent to meet him. As a result, the whole of northern Italy lay open to attack, and against all probability Hanno, who had been enslaved near Capua, had escaped to join Hannibal. In doing so, he had been reunited with his father and brothers, who had thought him long since dead.

Now anything seemed possible.

Hanno's belly rumbled, reminding him of his mission to find food and gather intelligence. He wasn't here to watch the local fauna or to ponder the future. His phalanx of Libyan spearmen, hidden to his rear where the undergrowth afforded better concealment, needed supplies as much as he did. He had another purpose too. His eyes traced the line of the empty, muddy track that ran past his hiding place, arrowing through the fragile young wheat, straight to the town's front gate. There were fresh holes in the nearest icy puddles, evidence that some time that morning, a horse had been ridden hard towards the town. The sentry had told him about it. Hanno felt sure that it would have been a messenger carrying word to *Victumulae* of the Carthaginian army's approach.

A thin smile traced his lips at the thought of the alarm that would have caused.

Since Hannibal's stunning victory at the River Trebia, every Roman for a hundred miles had been living in fear of his life. Farms, villages and even smaller towns had been abandoned; terrified citizens had fled to anywhere

that had thick walls and a garrison to defend them. The widespread panic had worked to the Carthaginians' advantage. Exhausted first by their harrowing crossing of the Alps and then by the savage battle with a double consular army, they had badly needed to rest and recuperate. Even so, hundreds of men – injured and whole – had died in the harsh weather that had followed the fighting. All but seven of the thirty-odd elephants had succumbed too. Ever the canny general, Hannibal had ordered his weakened forces to stay put. All non-essential military duties had ceased for a week. The deserted homesteads and farms had been a blessing, needing nothing more than men with accompanying mules to empty them of food and supplies.

These provisions soon ran out, however. So too did the foodstuffs offered by their new Gaulish allies. Thirty thousand men consumed a vast amount of grain daily, which was why the Carthaginians had broken camp the week before. At that very moment, they were marching on Victumulae. Word had it that the wheat stored behind its walls would feed them for weeks. Hanno's patrol was one of a number that had been sent out to reconnoitre the terrain in advance. He only had to return if he found evidence of an enemy ambush; otherwise, he could wait in the vicinity until the main force reached the town, which would be in the next day or two.

To his satisfaction, the countryside had been bare of nearly all human life. Apart from one clash with the enemy, from which they had emerged victorious, and a night spent in a friendly Gaulish village, it had been like travelling through a land inhabited by ghosts. Hannibal's cavalry, which was ranging far ahead of the infantry units, had brought more interesting news. Most of the survivors of the recent battle were holed up in Placentia, which lay some fifty miles to the southeast. Others had fled south, beyond the Carthaginians' reach, while an unknown number had sought refuge in places such as Victumulae. Despite the inevitability that the town would fall to Hannibal's superior forces, Hanno had taken the risk of moving closer to it than any of the cavalry units. He wanted to discover how many defenders they would face when the attack came, perhaps even strike a blow at an enemy patrol. Thus armed, he might be able to win his general's favour again.

It was unfortunate how things currently stood, he brooded. Ever since Hannibal had assembled a vast army and used it to take Saguntum, reopening hostilities with Rome, Hanno had longed for nothing more than to join the general in his struggle. What hot-blooded Carthaginian wouldn't have wanted to take revenge upon Rome for what it had done to their people? After being reunited with his family, things had started well. Hannibal had honoured Hanno with the command of a phalanx. Yet it had all gone wrong soon after that. Hanno's pulse quickened as he remembered recounting to Hannibal what he had done during an ambush on a Roman patrol a few days before the battle at the Trebia. Hannibal's fury at the news had been terrifying. Hanno had come within a whisker of being crucified. So too had Bostar and Sapho, his brothers, for not intervening. Since then, his general's disapproval would have been patent to a blind man.

In that ambush he had let two Roman cavalymen – Quintus, his former friend, and Fabricius, Quintus' father – go free. Perhaps it had been foolish, Hanno mused. If he had just killed them and had done, life would have been far simpler. Instead, in an effort to wash away the stain on his good name, he had volunteered for every subsequent patrol, every dangerous duty going. So far, none of it had made the slightest difference. Hannibal had given no sign that he'd even noticed. Full of resentment, Hanno wriggled his toes inside his leather boots, trying to restore some sensation to them. His effort failed, irritating him further. Here he was, freezing not just his extremities but his balls off, on a mission that was doomed to failure. What chance had he of determining the enemy's strength in Victumulae? Of ambushing an enemy unit? With Hannibal's army closing in, the chances that any legionaries would be sent beyond the town's walls were slim to none.

Hanno checked his disgruntlement. He'd had good reason for acting as he had. Despite the fact that he was the son of Hanno's owner, Quintus had become a friend. It would have been wrong to have slain him, not least because he had owed Quintus his life twice over. A debt is a debt, Hanno thought. When the time is right, it has to be repaid, whatever the risk of punishment. He had survived Hannibal's subsequent wrath, and then the battle, had he not? That in itself was proof that he had

done the right thing – that for the moment he held the gods' goodwill. Afterwards, Hanno had been careful to make generous sacrifices to Tanit, Melqart, Baal Saphon and Baal Hammon, the most important Carthaginian deities, thanking them for their protection. His chin lifted. With luck, he held their favour still. Something might yet come of his plan to gather intelligence.

He studied Victumulae with renewed interest. Thin trails of smoke drifted aloft from the inhabitants' chimneys, the only sign at this distance that the town had not been abandoned. The defences were impressive: behind a deep ditch, high stone walls with regular towers had been built. Hanno had little doubt that there would be catapults on the battlements as well. He and his men had no chance of success there. Along the eastern side of Victumulae wound the sinuous bends of the Padus, the great river that made the region so fertile. To the west lay more agricultural land; Hanno could see the shape of a large villa with its attendant cluster of outbuildings. Hope flared in his breast. Could someone be left within? It wasn't unreasonable to think that there might. So close to the walls, a stubborn landowner might still feel protected, might have emptied his house of valuables but chosen to remain until the enemy came into sight. Hanno made a snap decision. It was worth a try. They would advance under the cover of darkness, and if it came to nothing, they might at least find some food. If that strategy failed, he would have exhausted all possible avenues.

He hesitated. His plan meant the possibility of revealing his presence to the defenders. If they realised that his depleted phalanx was on its own, they might attack. In all likelihood, that would end with his and his soldiers' deaths. That won't happen, he told himself. Would they find anything of use, however? He fought the disappointment that met his lack of inspiration. More opportunities would come his way. He might win some glory in the taking of the town. If not then, perhaps in another battle. Hannibal would again come to see that he was worthy of trust.

The hours until darkness dragged by. Hanno's soldiers, who numbered fewer than two hundred, grew disgruntled as time went on. They had been cold and miserable for days, but until now they had been able to light fires each evening. Today, Hanno had banned them from doing so. His men

had to make do with wearing their blankets as extra cloaks, and stamping up and down within the copse. Gambling that they would find supplies at the villa, he placated the soldiers by allowing them to eat the last of their rations. He spent the afternoon moving among them as Malchus, his father, had taught him. Making jokes, sharing pieces of his ration of dried meat, calling out dozens of names that he'd been careful to memorise.

The spearmen – in red tunics and conical bronze helmets such as those he had been used to seeing around Carthage since he was a small child – were nearly all veterans, old enough to have been his father. They had served in more campaigns than Hanno could imagine; had followed Hannibal from Iberia, over the Alps to the enemy's heartland, losing more than half their number in the process. Just a few weeks before, Hanno would have found commanding such troops daunting in the extreme. He had had some military training in Carthage but had never led an army unit. He'd had to learn fast, however, when appointed as these men's commander by Hannibal. That had happened after Hanno's near-miraculous escape from slavery, and journey north with Quintus. Since then, he had led the Libyans in an ambush and then through the savagery of the battle at the Trebia. There were still a few who threw him scornful glances when they thought he wasn't looking, but he seemed to have won the acceptance, even respect, of the majority. In a fortunate twist of fate, he had saved the life of Muttumbaal, his second-in-command, during their recent clash with the enemy. Mutt now regarded him with considerable respect, which no doubt aided Hanno's cause. As the light leached from the sky, he felt that these were the reasons that their grumbling had not developed into anything more threatening.

He waited until his hand was nothing but a blurred outline in front of his face before he gave the order to move. Most people went to bed soon after night fell. If there was anyone in the villa, they would be no different. With audible grunts of satisfaction, his soldiers tramped out of the trees. They raised and lowered their massive round shields, or thrust their spears up and down to loosen muscles that had stiffened in the cold. The mail shirts that many had taken from the fallen at the Trebia jingled. Sandals crunched across the frozen mud. Here and there, a muted cough. Growled orders from the officers had the men form up, twenty wide, ten deep. It

wasn't long before they were ready. The air, thick with the soldiers' exhaled breath, grew tense. In the distance, Hanno could see red pinpricks moving slowly along the ramparts: the legionaries unfortunate enough to have drawn sentry duty. He grinned. The Romans on the wall had no idea that he and his phalanx were out there in the darkness, watching them. That their torches gave him sufficient light to plot a course towards the villa.

'Ready?' he hissed.

'Ready and willing, sir,' replied Mutt, a slight man with a perpetually doleful mien. It was inevitable that his cumbersome name had been shortened to 'Mutt'.

'We advance at the walk. Make as little sound as possible. No talking!' Hanno waited until his orders had been passed on and then, gripping his own shield and thrusting spear, he paced forward into the darkness.

It was hard to be sure, but Hanno stopped at what he estimated was three hundred paces from the town's walls. He indicated to Mutt that the men were to halt. Peering up at the battlements, he pricked his ears. Beyond catapult range, and out of sight, there was little chance that they would be discovered. When he heard the sentries talking to each other, his hope that they would pass unnoticed became certainty. Even still, the knot of tension in his belly tightened as he drew near to the darkened villa. It didn't help when he heard an owl calling. Hanno felt the hairs on his neck prickle, but he shoved the disquiet away. The sound did not signify bad luck to Carthaginians. He only knew of it because of his time in Quintus' household. All the same, he was glad that his men didn't know of the Roman superstition.

He crept on. The villa loomed out of the black, as silent as a vast tomb. Hanno's stomach clenched further, but he kept moving. Every damn household in Italy was the same at this time of night, he told himself. There were no dogs barking because they had all gone inside with the inhabitants. If that's the case, his inner demon shouted, you're not going to find out anything. You're a fool to think that they'll have left any food behind either. Every last morsel will be needed inside *Victumulae*.

Reminded of the pompous lectures that his oldest brother Sapho was so fond of giving him, Hanno set his jaw. In his search for intelligence, what he was doing made sense. There was no going back now, and they

would be in and out in no time. His plan was for Mutt and most of his men to remain on guard outside, their job to listen out for any indication of troops approaching from the town. If that happened, Mutt was to give a prearranged whistle to alert Hanno so they could all withdraw in secret. While his second-in-command stood watch, four parties, ten strong each, were to move on to the property. One, under Hanno's command, would steal into the house itself while the others, each led by a dependable spearman, would search the farm buildings for supplies.

Hanno padded up to one of the small windows on the villa's south-facing wall and stared between the gaps in the closely spaced wooden slats. It was pitch black inside. He laid his ear against the cold shutters. He listened for a long time, but heard nothing. Reassured, he had the four files of men fall out.

'Be careful, sir,' whispered Mutt.

'I will. Remember, if there's any sign of Roman troops, you're to pull back. I don't want to lose men in a pointless clash.'

'And you, sir?'

'I'll be right behind you.' Hanno threw him a confident grin. 'To your position.'

Mutt saluted and withdrew. Hanno watched as most of the phalanx moved out of sight before he led his party forward. The three other files moved alongside his, the spearmen leading them parallel with Hanno. They paced along the length of the eastern wall, coming to a halt by the corner of the building that would open on to the courtyard. Before he exposed himself, Hanno took a couple of quick looks around the angle of the brickwork. The gloom afforded him little detail, but he discerned the outline of paved paths and manicured plants and trees: the household garden. A short distance away, towards the town, lay what looked like sheds, stables and a large barn. There was no sign of life. Feeling calmer, he eyed the three leading spearmen. 'Search every building. Take only food. Stay alert. If you meet any serious resistance, pull back. I want no heroics in the dark. Clear?'

'Yes, sir,' they whispered.

Hanno stepped around the corner; behind him, he sensed his soldiers following. There was a metallic *tap* as someone's spear knocked off the

helmet of the man in front. Hanno shot a furious glare over his shoulder, but didn't pause. With luck, the sound wouldn't have been loud enough to wake anyone who might be inside the villa. He traced his way along the wall, searching for the main entrance. It was twenty paces further on. It was a typical heavy wooden door, its surface studded with metal, and it was closed. Hanno pressed his fingers against the timbers and pushed. Nothing happened, so he pushed a little harder. His efforts made no difference. His heart began to race. Could someone be within, or had the door just been locked when the residents left?

Hanno could feel the weight of his men's stares on his back. He ignored it as best he could. He was on the horns of a dilemma now. Anyone inside would be woken if he tried to force an entrance, but Hanno didn't want to walk away. If the house turned out to be empty, then he would have given up without even trying. He moved away from the door and looked up, gauging the height of the roof. Laying his shield and spear to one side, he beckoned to the three nearest soldiers. 'Bogu, you're to come with me.' As the shortest of the trio scurried over, Hanno pointed to the others. 'You two can give us a boost up.'

They gave him a blank look.

'Bogu and I will climb up, drop down the other side, and open the gate from within.'

'Shall I go in your stead, sir?' asked the older of the pair. 'Save you the trouble.'

Hanno didn't even consider the suggestion. His blood was up. 'No. It won't take us more than a few moments.'

Obediently, they shuffled in and made a bridge with their hands.

Hanno placed one foot on to their interlinked fingers. At once they swept him upwards. Throwing his arms forward to balance himself, he swung his free leg over and scrambled up on to the roof. The bottom of his bronze cuirass made a heavy, clunking sound as it connected with the tiles. *Shit!* Half kneeling, half upright, Hanno froze. For several heart-stopping moments, he heard nothing. Then the sound of someone moving into the courtyard. A cough, a snort. *Hoyc-thth* as the man spat. 'Fucking cats,' Hanno heard him mutter in Latin. 'Always wandering around on the roof.'

Hanno waited, his pulse racing, as the man slouched back to his post, right under his very position. It had to be a doorman, he thought. Which possibly meant that the master of the house was at home. What should he do? It only took an instant to decide. If he left without proceeding further, he would have to live with the regret that he might have discovered something useful to Hannibal. What risk could there be anyway? He and Bogu were more than a match for some old, unfit slave. The fool had probably gone back to sleep already.

He leaned over and indicated that Bogu should join him.

Hanno hissed a warning about Bogu's mail, and the soldier joined him on the roof with hardly a sound. 'I heard one man below,' Hanno whispered. 'I'll go first. You come down after.'

Taking great care not to let his cuirass or the tip of his scabbard touch the clay tiles, Hanno shuffled forward with bent knees. Reaching the apex of the roof, he stared downward. The courtyard within was typical, and resembled that in Quintus' house. Covered walkways ran around the rectangular space. Ornamental shrubs and statues dotted the fringes. Fruit trees and short rows of vines filled most of the rest of the area, which was dominated by a central fountain, now frozen into silence. Not a soul was to be seen.

Content, Hanno eased himself on to the inward-sloping face of the roof. He realised at once that to descend safely, he needed to sit down. That meant his cuirass would clash off the tiles again, alerting the doorman. There was only one thing for it. Stand up, start to walk down the roof. Pick up speed. Reach the roof's edge and jump. He filled Bogu in on his plan, ordering him to follow at once. Hanno expected to fall about his own height, landing on a mosaic floor. To roll and jump up, drag out his sword and kill the doorman before opening the portal to admit his soldiers.

He didn't expect to land on top of the doorman, who had wandered back outside.

Nor in fact was he a doorman. He was a veteran legionary, a *triarius*, in full armour.

Hanno realised there was something wrong as they fell in a tumble of flailing limbs. Unfortunately, he was the one who cracked his head on the ground. His helmet took much of the impact, but it couldn't prevent him

from being momentarily stunned. In considerable pain, Hanno struggled to get his bearings. A punch from the enraged triarius didn't help either, snapping his chin back and knocking his helmet against the floor again. Somehow he managed to wriggle free of the other's grasping hands and clamber to his feet. The triarius did the same. In the flickering light cast by a lamp in a wall alcove, the pair studied one another, both equally stunned by what they saw.

What in Baal Hammon's name is a legionary doing here? thought Hanno, fighting panic. He won't be alone. 'Bogu! Get down here!'

'Gods above, you're one of Hannibal's men! Awake! Awake! We're under attack!' bellowed the Roman.

Hanno threw a glance at the door. His heart sank. It wasn't just bolted; there was a large lock as well. His gaze shot back to the triarius. A bunch of keys hung from his gilded belt. Cursing, Hanno ripped out his sword. Their only chance was to kill the Roman as fast as possible and let the rest of his men in.

Shouting again for his comrades, the triarius pulled out his *gladius*. 'Gugga filth!'

Hanno had been called a 'little rat' before, but the insult still stung. By way of answer, he aimed a savage thrust at the other's belly. He laughed as the triarius dodged to the side, unable to block it. 'Filth? You stink worse than a sow.'

A series of loud thumps on the roof presaged Bogu's arrival. The spearman had the sense to jump down on the far side of the triarius, who spat a loud curse. He couldn't fight with an enemy on each side. Rather than run, however, he bravely backed into the archway that framed the entrance, thereby stopping either Carthaginian from getting to the door.

The sound of raised voices in the courtyard told Hanno that time was of the essence. 'On him, Bogu!' he shouted. As the spearman advanced, Hanno feinted for the triarius' left foot but as the Roman tried to move out of range, Hanno brought his right hand up, smashing the hilt of his weapon into his opponent's face. With an audible *crunch*, the man's nose broke. There was a cry of agony and the triarius staggered back, blood pouring from his nostrils. Hanno followed him as a viper does a mouse. Deadly quick. With all his strength, he rammed

his blade into the Roman's flesh just above the top of his mail shirt. Grating off the vertebrae in the man's spinal column, it sank in nearly to the crossguard. The triarius' eyes bulged; his mouth worked; bloody froth left his lips; he died.

Grunting with effort, Hanno pulled the sword out. He closed his eyes against the shower of blood that followed. The corpse sagged to the floor, and he stooped, frantically ripping the bunch of keys free. Hanno glanced to his rear and wished he hadn't. At least a dozen *triararii*, in various states of undress, were charging across the courtyard. 'Keep them back!' he screamed at Bogu. He spun to the door. Fists were pounding on it from the other side. 'Sir! Are you all right? Sir!' clamoured his men. Hanno didn't waste his breath answering. First, he slid open the bolt. Selecting a key, he shoved it into the massive lock and tried to twist it to the left. It wouldn't move. He moved it in the opposite direction. Nothing happened.

Frantically, he selected another key. Sandals slapped off the mosaic. Angry yells as the body was seen. Bogu screamed a battle cry. Then, the clash of arms not half a dozen steps behind him. Close. They were so close. Hanno fumbled with the key, unable to fit its bulky end into the hole. It took all of his effort not to scream. Forcing himself to slow down, he managed to insert it into the lock. It fitted better than the previous two, and his hopes rose. A turn to the left didn't work. Undaunted, Hanno had begun wrenching it to the right when he heard someone emit a strangled gasp of pain. 'I'm hurt, sir!' hissed Bogu.

Hanno made the fatal mistake of twisting his head to look. As he did, two *triararii* charged at the same time. Bogu shoved his spear at the one without a *scutum*, but that allowed the other to close with him. Driving his shield into the spearman, the triarius rammed Bogu against the wall. As Hanno realised, it wasn't to kill the spearman. It was to allow the Roman's comrades to barge past – towards him. Too late, he turned. Too late, he tried to engage the key in the lock's mechanism. An instant later, something smashed into the back of his head. Stars burst across his vision. His world narrowed to a tunnel before him. All he could see was his hand, which was slowly letting go of the key. A key that had not turned enough to open the lock. In the distance, he could hear his soldiers' shouts mingling with those of the *triararii*. He wanted to shout, 'I'm coming,' but his voice

wouldn't work. His strength had gone too, and there was nothing Hanno could do to stop his knees from buckling.

Then everything went black.

Hanno woke, coughing and spluttering, as a tide of icy water was emptied over his head. Fear and rage surged through him as he tried to get his bearings. He was lying on the flat of his back on a cold stone floor – where, he had no idea. He struggled to rise, but his arms and legs were bound. Trying to ignore the worst headache he could remember, Hanno blinked to clear his eyes of water. Two men – triarii from the look of them – were studying him, sneers twisting their faces. Above them, the low roof of a cell. Panic made his heart flutter. Where in hell's name was he?

'Enjoyed your little sleep?' asked the man on his left, a shifty-looking type with a wall eye.

'You've been out for long enough,' added his companion in a falsely solicitous tone. 'But now it's time for a little chat.'

Hanno sensed that would involve a lot of pain. He strained his ears. There was no sound of fighting. No clash of arms. His heart sank. Mut and his men were gone – if he was even still in the villa.

A scornful laugh from the first man, who saw what he was doing. 'You'll get no help here. We're safe inside Victumulae.'

A moan. Hanno's gaze shot to his left. Bogu was lying a few paces away. A large bloodstain on the tunic over his belly and a wound to his lower right leg didn't bode well.

*It's just me and Bogu.* Hanno spat several ripe curses in Carthaginian.

Another snort of amusement. 'Wondering why your men didn't break down the door, eh?'

That *was* what Hanno was thinking, but he kept his face blank. They would have no idea that he could speak Latin.

'They pissed off as soon as we sounded the alarm,' said the second soldier to his comrade. 'We couldn't believe our luck. They must have thought reinforcements would be sent out from the town. Stupid bastards.'

A tide of weariness washed over Hanno. They were just following my orders, he thought.

The second man leered. 'If only they'd known that the sound of the trumpets was all the back-up we were going to get!'

Hanno felt sick at the very thought. He closed his eyes, but the kick to his ribs that followed made them shoot open again with pain. He tried to roll away from the next kick, and it caught him in the back instead. He steeled himself for the next.

'Enough,' snapped a voice. 'I'll decide how and when he and the other maggot are to be punished.'

The sound of men snapping to attention. 'Yes, sir. Sorry, sir.'

'Get him up.'

Hanno felt hands grabbing him under his armpits; he was lifted to a standing position. His surroundings were grim: a square, stone-flagged chamber with no windows. Three small lamps shed enough light to see the damp running down the walls and the table to one side upon which sat a frightening array of metal instruments, every one of them barbed or sporting a cruel blade. A glowing brazier promised more varieties of pain. Watched in impassive silence by the officer who had entered, Hanno's arms were raised and the rope around his wrists was looped over a hook that dangled from the ceiling. As his shoulder sockets took his entire body weight, Hanno's agony reached new heights. Desperate, he reached down with his feet. The floor was agonisingly close – he could brush it with the tips of his sandals, but couldn't support himself for more than a few moments. Gasping with frustration and pain, he looked up.

To Hanno's utter shock, he recognised the stocky officer – square-chinned, clean-shaven, about thirty-five – before him. It was the man who'd been beneath his blade during the fight with a Roman patrol a week or more earlier. The enemy he had let live, so that he could save Mutt's life. *I should have killed him.* Hanno felt terrible for even thinking such a thing. Doing that would have ensured this man's death, but also that of Mutt. *He* would still be a prisoner, and merely faced with a different torturer. Hanno noted that the man did not appear to have recognised him. There was a tiny chance that that might work to his advantage. He held fiercely on to that hope.

The officer gave him a mirthless smile. 'Excruciating, isn't it? Count yourself lucky that I didn't tell them to tie your hands behind your back

first. That would have dislocated your shoulders the moment they hauled you aloft.' A scowl when Hanno didn't answer. 'You can't understand a word I say, can you?'

Hanno said nothing.

'Hang the other one up too,' commanded the officer.

Hanno watched with helpless rage as Bogu was dragged up, moaning, and suspended beside him. Eventually, the spearman's eyes came into focus; he tried to smile, but grimaced instead. 'We'll be fine,' Hanno whispered.

'S'll right, sir. You don't need to lie to me.'

Hanno's next words died in his throat. Fresh blood had already soaked through Bogu's tunic from his belly wound. They were both going to die in this room. Bogu knew it. He knew it. There was no point pretending. 'May the gods give us a safe passage.'

'Silence!' cried the officer. He clicked his fingers. 'Find me that gugga slave who was mentioned earlier.'

'Yes, sir.' The wall-eyed soldier moved towards the door.

'There's no need for the slave. I speak Latin well enough,' said Hanno.

The officer mastered his shock well. 'How do you know my tongue?' he barked.

'I had a Greek tutor as a boy.'

The officer's eyebrows rose. 'A civilised gugga, eh?'

'Plenty of us are well educated,' replied Hanno stiffly.

A surprised look. 'Does your man also speak Latin?'

'Bogu? No.'

'There are differences between the classes then, as there are here,' mused the officer, with a scornful glance at his soldiers. 'Your Latin accent is not that of a Greek-speaker, though. It sounds more as if you come from Campania.'

It was Hanno's turn to feel startled. Yet it wasn't surprising that he spoke like Quintus and his family. 'I have lived in southern Italy,' he admitted.

The Roman prowled closer. He pushed Hanno between the shoulders so that he swung forward, off the tips of his toes. His arms wrenched back in their sockets, and Hanno bawled with pain. 'Don't lie to me!' shouted the officer.

Desperate to relieve the pressure on his shoulders, Hanno pushed downwards with all the power in his legs and managed – just – to stop himself from swinging back and having the agony rip through him again. ‘I–It’s true. I was captured at sea between Carthage and Sicily with a friend of mine. We were sold into slavery. A Campanian family bought me. I lived near Capua for over a year.’

‘What’s your owner’s name?’ demanded the officer, quick as a flash.

Hanno’s pride reared up. ‘I don’t have an owner.’

A punch in the solar plexus knocked the air from his lungs; more pain as his shoulders took the strain of his body weight. An involuntary retch brought up a little fluid from his stomach.

The officer waited a moment before shoving his face into Hanno’s purple, wheezing one. ‘I doubt very much whether your master granted you manumission so that you could fuck off and join Hannibal’s army. If he didn’t, that means that you’re still his slave. Understand?’

Arguing was futile, but Hanno was furious. ‘Being captured by pirates doesn’t turn me into a damn slave. I’m a free man. A Carthaginian!’

His reward was another powerful punch. Hanno vomited what liquid remained in his belly. He was sorry that it didn’t hit the officer’s feet, but the Roman had stepped well back. He waited patiently until Hanno had finished. Then he muttered in Hanno’s ear, ‘If you’ve been sold to a Roman citizen, you’re his slave whether you like it or not. I’m not going to argue about it, and if you’ve any sense, neither are you. What’s your master’s name?’

‘Gaius Fabricius.’

‘Never heard of him.’

Hanno waited for another punch, but it didn’t land. ‘His wife’s called Atia. They have two children, called Quintus and Aurelia. Their farm is about half a day’s walk from Capua.’

‘Continue.’

Hanno described the details of his life in Quintus’ household, including his relationships with Quintus and Aurelia, and the visit of Caius Minucius Flaccus – an extremely high-ranking nobleman – to their house. He didn’t mention Agesandros, the overseer who had made his life a misery, or his search for Suniaton, his friend.

‘All right, that’s enough. Maybe you were a slave in Capua.’ The officer’s gaze became calculating. ‘So you ran away when you heard Hannibal had entered Cisalpine Gaul?’

Hanno was damned if he was going to pretend that he had skulked off like a wolf in the night. ‘No. Quintus, my master’s son, let me go.’

Disbelief twisted the officer’s face. ‘You expect me to believe that?’

‘It’s true.’

An incredulous hiss. ‘Where was his father while this was going on? And his mother?’

‘Fabricius was away with the army. Atia had no idea what Quintus was up to.’

‘What a little viper! Not a son I’d wish to have.’ The officer shook his head. ‘This is all neither here nor there, however. What’s far more important is discovering why you and your men were prowling around that villa at night.’

It didn’t matter if the officer knew, thought Hanno. ‘I hoped to find someone who knew how many defenders there are in the town.’

‘And you did! Me!’ crowed the officer. ‘But I’m not going to tell you.’

*You prick.*

‘So you were scouting for Hannibal?’

Hanno nodded.

‘They say his army is heading here. Is that correct?’

‘Yes.’

A heartbeat’s pause. ‘How many soldiers has he?’

‘Fifty thousand or so,’ lied Hanno.

The officer’s face grew thunderous, and Hanno felt a dark joy. ‘More Gauls arrive to join him every day.’ The instant the truthful words had left his mouth, Hanno knew that he’d pushed the officer too far. The next punch was the hardest yet. Hanno felt pain so intense that he blacked out. He came to with the officer slapping him across the face.

‘You think that’s bad? It’s nothing compared to the suffering to come. You’ll be nothing but a shell when my men have finished with you.’

Hanno’s eyes followed the officer’s to the tools on the table. He felt his gorge rise. How long before he was begging for mercy? Pissing himself?

Would he be granted a quick end if he mentioned sparing the Roman's life? Shame filled him. *Have some pride!*

'Roman scum,' croaked Bogu in poor Latin. 'Wait. For . . . pain . . . Hannibal's army inflict . . . you. Hannibal . . . better general than any . . . you have.'

Hanno shot a warning look at Bogu, but it was too late.

'Heat me an iron!' cried the officer. He stalked over and drove a balled fist right into the middle of the bloodstain on Bogu's belly.

Bogu roared in agony, and the officer laughed.

'Leave him alone. He's injured!' shouted Hanno.

'Which means he'll talk more easily. When the dog dies, I'll still have you.'

Hanno felt instant relief, but guilt tore at him because Bogu would suffer first. Perhaps that had been the spearman's motive, though.

'Fetch that gugga slave! I need to understand what this injured piece of shit says, and I can't trust the other to translate.'

The wall-eyed soldier beat a hasty exit.

The officer stood over the brazier, tapping his foot with impatience until the second legionary declared that the iron was hot enough. Using a thick piece of blanket, the Roman seized the cool end of the instrument and held it aloft. Hanno's skin crawled. The tip was a bright orange-red colour. He struggled to free his wrists, but all he did was hurt himself even more.

'This might stop the bleeding,' mused the officer.

Bogu's eyes bulged with horror as the Roman casually approached but, to Hanno's admiration, he did not utter a word.

*Hissss.* The officer scowled with concentration, twisting the iron around in the spearman's belly wound.

Bogu let out a long, ear-splitting shriek.

'You cruel bastard!' roared Hanno, forgetting his own pain.

The officer whirled around, thrusting the still-glowing end at Hanno's face. Terrified, he shoved backward with the tips of his toes until he could go no further. Grinning, the Roman brought it within a finger's width of his right eye. 'Do you want a piece of this as well?'

Hanno couldn't answer. He was still aware of Bogu's screams, but it was taking all of his strength to hold himself still. He could already feel

the muscles in his legs protesting, could feel cramp developing in his toes. A few heartbeats, and his eyeball would rupture on the red-hot iron. Great Baal Saphon, he prayed. Help me!

The door opened, and the wall-eyed soldier entered. He was followed by a brown-skinned man in a threadbare tunic. With his tight, curly black hair and dark complexion, he could have been any one of thousands of Hanno's fellow Carthaginians. The officer turned, lowering his iron. 'Finally.' He gave the slave a hard look. 'You speak Latin?'

'Yes, sir.' The slave glanced at Hanno and Bogu. A flicker of emotion flared in his brown eyes, but it was instantly masked.

'Good. I want you to interpret every word that this wretch says.' The iron stabbed towards Bogu before the officer replaced it in the brazier and selected another. 'How big is Hannibal's host?'

The slave translated.

Bogu mumbled something.

'What did he say?' demanded the officer.

'It's greater than any army that Rome can raise,' said the slave warily.

'Gods above, this one is also too stupid to give me the truth!' The officer leaned down and laid the iron on to the shallow cut on Bogu's left thigh. More hissing. More roars of pain. Bogu moved his leg away, but he was too weak to stop the Roman from following it with the hot metal. 'It's fifty thousand strong,' he shouted.

The slave repeated his words in Latin.

The officer's eyes swivelled to Hanno, who would have shrugged if he could. 'That's what I told you.' He thought that the Roman had swallowed the bait, but the scowl that followed soon told him otherwise.

The officer went searching through the instruments on the table. There was an exclamation of delight as he lifted a length of iron the end of which had been fashioned into the shape of a letter 'F'. He brandished it at Hanno in triumph. 'See this? F stands for *fugitivus*. You won't survive our little session here, but with this mark on you, there'll be no way of forgetting what you are during whatever time is left to you.'

Hanno watched with rising dismay as the length of metal was pushed into the brazier's heart. He had seen a runaway slave who'd been branded in a similar way once before. The puckered F on the man's forehead had

filled him with revulsion. Now he was to endure the same fate. He writhed in his bonds, trying to free his wrists. All he did was to send waves of fresh torment through his arms and shoulders.

The officer seized another hot iron and approached Bogu again.

‘Who are these men, sir?’ ventured the slave.

The officer paused. ‘They’re soldiers who answer to Hannibal. We captured them outside the walls.’

‘Hannibal?’ repeated the slave slowly.

‘That’s right, you idiot!’ The officer raised his iron in threat and the man cowered away.

I’d wager that your heart is singing at the idea, thought Hanno. As mine is. Let the gods bring our army to the gates soon. Give this monster and his henchmen a lingering death. But he knew that his family and his comrades would come too late for Bogu – and for him.

It was time to prepare for death as best he could.