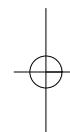




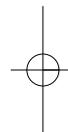
Captain of Rome





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MASTERS OF THE SEA
Ship of Rome

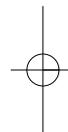




MASTERS OF THE SEA

Captain of Rome

JOHN STACK



HarperCollinsPublishers





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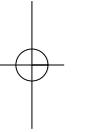
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*To my children,
Zoe, Andrew and Amy,
with affection and gratitude.
I love you.*







CHAPTER ONE

‘Battle speed!’
The *Aquila* sprung to life at Atticus’s shouted command, the ram-tipped bow of the Roman trireme slicing cleanly through the wave tops as the galley accelerated to seven knots, the drum master’s beat commanding the actions of two hundred chained slaves, a multitude working as one. The order was repeated on the aft-decks of the galleys surrounding the *Aquila* and the captain noted with satisfaction that the once inexperienced crews of the ships flanking his own now moved with alacrity and purpose. There were thirty galleys in total, each one based on the new cataphract design, although the *Aquila* bore subtle differences that set her apart and spoke of her experience; healed scars from forgotten skirmishes, timbers weathered by a hundred storms.

‘Two points to starboard!’ Atticus commanded.

Gaius, the helmsman, adjusted the *Aquila*’s trim, lining her up with the centre of the harbour mouth.

The Carthaginian-held port town of Thermae was nestled neatly beyond the enfolding headlands that protected the inner waters, her docks home to a fleet of enemy galleys and transport ships, their number beyond counting. Atticus moved to the side rail of the aft-deck, leaning out to look beyond the





corvus boarding ramp that now dominated the foredeck of the *Aquila*. He instinctively cursed the unsightly device, its bulk out of place on the otherwise unobstructed foredeck, the arrow-like lines of the galley distorted by the new addition.

‘Masthead . . . report!’ Atticus shouted, his green eyes drawn upwards to the lookout and the figure of Corin standing precariously over the lifting yard fifty feet above. The youngest member of the crew was a fellow Greek from the city of Locri. His eyesight was akin to an eagle and he paused before replying to confirm his estimate.

‘No more than ten galleys! One quinquereme! Roughly twenty transport ships!’

Atticus nodded and turned to search for Lucius, his second-in-command. The familiar figure was striding across the aft-deck, his restless eyes continually ranging over the deck of the *Aquila*, noting every action of the crew, his forty-five years resting easily on his solid frame.

‘You there, Baro?’ he roared as he went, ‘One cubit on the starboard aft running line.’ The crewman reacted instantly, two additional men rushing to his aid as the sail was given an extra degree of tautness.

Atticus nodded to Lucius who immediately came to his captain’s side.

‘What’s your assessment Lucius?’ he asked, drawing on the older man’s experience; a knowledge that seemed to encompass many lifetimes.

‘It’s exactly as reported. One squad. Minimal activity.’ Lucius replied with a scowl, his expression troubled.

‘And . . .?’ Atticus prompted, sensing the unease.

‘When have you ever known a report to be so exact, Captain?’

Atticus nodded, considering Lucius’s unspoken opinion. Since the Roman victory at Mylae three months before, all enemy



activity on the northern coast of Sicily had dissipated, both on land and sea, and the Roman transports plying weekly from Brolium to Rome sailed unhindered through empty sea lanes.

Atticus looked to port and the rapidly rising sun an hour above the eastern horizon. It shone white behind a veil of light cloud and the surface of the sea split the morning light into a million shards, glare upon glare until Atticus was forced to look away, blinking rapidly to clear his vision. He looked starboard to an equally empty western horizon, the shoreline bleeding away until it was lost behind the curve of a distant headland. It was as if the Carthaginians had all but abandoned northern Sicily to the Romans.

'Well, Captain?' Atticus heard, turning to see Titus Aurelius Varro, the tribune and commander of the attack fleet of thirty galleys, crossing the aft-deck towards him, leaving a huddled group of four senators in his wake.

'Enemy numbers as reported, Tribune.' Atticus replied, the tone of his words voicing his underlying uncertainty.

'Excellent!' Varro replied, slapping his hands together, not understanding the sub-text. 'Well then, ready the ship for battle.'

'Yes, Tribune.' Atticus saluted, his face betraying none of his inner thoughts.

Titus Aurelius Varro was a young man, not yet twenty, but his father was a senior senator and magistrate and it was rumoured amongst the fleet commanders that he had paid a king's ransom for his son's commission. Atticus could only marvel at how fast fortune had transformed the Roman navy. Less than six months ago it was a provincial force of a dozen galleys and the sailors and marines who served in her ranks were treated with contempt by the vaulted legions of the Republic. Now the *Classis Romanus*, the Roman Fleet, numbered over two hundred galleys, both Roman and captured Carthaginian and the command of her forces was



sought after by the elite of Roman society. It was for this reason also, Atticus suspected, that Varro had chosen the *Aquila* as his flagship, no doubt hoping to emulate the success of Gaius Duilius, Consul of the Roman Senate, who had sailed on the *Aquila* at Mylae.

Atticus turned to Lucius and repeated the tribune's order. Within a minute the lifting yard of the mainsail was lowered and the huge canvas was furled and made secure. The lifting yard was quickly re-raised to half mast and swung through ninety degrees to be fastened parallel to the mainmast. The galleys surrounding the *Aquila* noted the action, the signal of commitment to battle and they followed suit, the order rippling down along the line.

The fleet of thirty galleys tightened up as the harbour mouth approached, an unconscious movement that sharpened the thin edge of the arrow head formation, the manoeuvre bunching the ships together, coiling the energy of their advance, a deadly force that would be unleashed on the unprepared enemy at Thermae.

The rhythmic beat of ten thousand footfalls filled the valley floor, the sound overlain with sporadic clinks of metal on metal as equipment and kit swayed with the repetitive march of five thousand legionaries. Forty maniples of the Ninth Legion had been assigned the task of securing the town of Thermae. They were the 'Wolves of Rome', a legion of men who carried with them a near fanatical lust for revenge against the Carthaginian foe who had humiliated them at Makella only months before. The *Punici* had brought the Ninth to their knees under the double burden of starvation and pestilence, isolating them in hostile territory. The Carthaginian blockade of Sicily had cut the legions off from the supplies of Rome and it was only the naval victory at Mylae that released the stranglehold, and freed the soldiers.





With the threat of starvation lifted the Ninth had slowly regained its strength, the influx of men and equipment, of food and supplies, sweeping away the last vestiges of weakness and vulnerability. The legionaries had kept the wounds open however, constantly picking at the scab to reveal the raw flesh beneath, never allowing the pain to abate fully less they forget the measure of revenge owed to them. Their wound could only be cauterised in the heat of battle, sealed with the blood of their enemy.

Septimus Laetoniuss Capito, marine centurion of the *Aquila*, marched with the IV maniple. At six foot four inches and two-hundred and twenty pounds, he stood tall in the front rank but his stride was marked by a slight limp, an injury suffered at Mylae when his demi-maniple of sixty legionaries swept the main deck of the Carthaginian flagship in that bitter and hard-won fight. After the battle Septimus had been amongst the first relief column to reach Makella and rescue the Ninth, the fulfilment of an oath to the man now marching beside him, Marcus Fabius Buteo, centurion of the IV and Septimus's old commander before he had transferred to the marines. Marcus had a dozen years and a hundred battles on Septimus but his stride matched the youngest men of the legion and his will and discipline outstripped them all.

'Anything?' Marcus asked, noticing Septimus's gaze sweep the hills on either side of their approach, trusting the younger man's eyesight over his own.

'Nothing,' Septimus replied, his voice betraying his unease. 'No sign on either flank.'

'Bloody cavalry!' Marcus spat, he like Septimus keeping any comment of disquiet to himself, knowing his men behind him were in easy earshot.

'There's still time,' Septimus remarked as if to himself.





Marcus grunted a reply in agreement, both men lapsing back into silence.

Septimus shifted his gaze to the head of the column and the mounted figure of Lucius Postumius Megellus, legate and commander of the Ninth and Second legions in Sicily. He rode with his back straight and his head upright, his gaze to a casual observer seemingly transfixed on the town of Thermae now less than a mile away. Septimus knew however he had to be searching surreptitiously for the outriders of the cavalry detachment that protected the flanks of the marching column. They had ridden in as each mile of the approach was covered, reporting each time that the flanks were clear for the next mile of advance. Now they were overdue.

Hamilcar Barca rode with his chest a mere inch from the withers, his body moulded to the shoulders of his mount as horse and rider moved as one. At full tilt the wind rushed in Hamilcar's ears and the coarse hair of the mane whipped his cheek as his senses were filled with the warm smell of horse sweat and leather. He crooked his head and looked over his shoulder, blinking rapidly to clear the windswept tears from his eyes. Behind him rode five hundred of his men, Carthaginians all, riding with the same fury as their leader, but unable to match the pace of Hamilcar's Arabian mare, a light horse bred in the desert for speed and stamina, an animal with a proud and fiery temperament that set her apart and above from the other races of horse.

Hamilcar returned his gaze to the ground ahead, judging the lie of the land with a skilled glance before shifting his weight slightly left, a signal to his mount to veer up the gentle slope that screened the Carthaginians from their enemy, the riders behind him matching their commander's course. A sudden blaze of shame washed over Hamilcar as he rode but



instead of suppressing it he nurtured the flame, holding it close to his core where his hatred for the enemy lay. Hamilcar had commanded the right flank at Mylae and had witnessed at first hand the staggering reversal of the once invincible Carthaginian fleet. It was he who issued the general order to retreat, a command both shameful and necessary that dishonoured him and his men. The anger he felt had been partly assuaged when he crucified Hannibal Gisco, the foolhardy and maniacal commander of the fleet, but now it returned anew at the thought of the Roman enemy just beyond his field of vision and he pushed his mount to increase her speed as she fought against the slope of the hill.

‘Captain, signal the fleet, full attack.’

‘Tribune?’ Atticus replied perplexed, spinning around to face the younger man.

‘Full attack, Captain!’ Varro repeated, his expression animated, his eyes restless as his gaze swept the inner harbour.

‘But Tribune,’ Atticus began cautiously, trying to read the young man’s intention. ‘The Carthaginians are heavily outnumbered. If we sent an envoy forward alone it is possible they will surrender without a fight.’

‘Surrender?’ Varro replied, his expression one of genuine shock. ‘Why would we wish for them to surrender? Where is the glory in that? We have come here for battle and by the gods we will have it. Order full attack.’

Atticus nodded but felt it necessary to point out one other important element, wondering if the tribune had considered it. ‘And a rear-guard, Tribune?’ he said, ‘I suggest five galleys from the third squad.’

‘A rear-guard?’ Varro asked, his tone now laced with impatience. ‘The enemy are there, Captain,’ he said, pointing forward.



Atticus made to reply but Varro cut him off – ‘Order full attack, Captain. Now!’ he snarled, his expression no longer friendly, his eyes cold.

Atticus hesitated, every instinct of his experience calling on him to counter the asinine command. He was stunned by the tribune’s words, until suddenly realisation swept over him. Varro was looking to make his name in battle and he was going to force an all out battle if necessary. Atticus weighed up his options for a heartbeat longer. He had none.

‘Lucius, signal the fleet!’ he ordered.

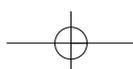
Varro smiled once more and returned to the group of senators, talking animatedly as he went, expounding the genius of his strategy.

‘This is madness,’ Lucius said quietly beside Atticus. ‘We could take Thermae without a fight and I don’t like entering a hostile port without someone watching our backs.’

‘I agree,’ Atticus remarked, his own gaze shifting to the Carthaginian galleys. For fifteen generations the Punic navy had been masters of the Mediterranean, their seamanship and naval tactics second to none. The *corvus* had surprised them at Mylae but it was the only tactic the Romans could deploy. As Varro was going to force a fight, the Roman legionaries would have to board in strength, they would have to carry the fight to the enemy. It was going to be a hard fight, but more than that, Atticus knew it was going to be a waste of men’s lives, a pointless attack where none was required. He moved aside from the tiller and walked forward to look over the assembled legionaries of the *Aquila* on the main deck. On this day, their blood would be on Roman hands.

‘Form lines! Deploy the skirmishers!’

Marcus automatically began to relay the order from the front of the column to his maniple, an innate reaction borne



from over fifteen years in command. The men moved with disciplined intent as they manoeuvred into the *triplex acies* formation, the three line deployment with the light *hastati* troops in the front line, the more seasoned and heavily armoured *principes* in the second and the older veteran *triarii* in the third. The lightly armoured and more independent *velites* broke off as skirmishers, their javelins light in their hands as they ranged over the ground immediately in front of the deploying legionaries.

Septimus moved without hesitation into the second line although he was no longer one of the *principes* of the IV maniple of the Ninth as he had been at the Battle of Agrigentum. As he did so he examined the sudden command of the legate to deploy into battle formation. Thermae was less than two hundred yards away and seemed completely devoid of activity. This in itself was not surprising given that the advancing Roman legion would have been seen from over a mile away and would have prompted every civilian to flee into the interior of the town. What was unusual however was that the outriders of the Roman cavalry had not reappeared, and since the legion was in enemy territory, albeit to subdue a town that was reported to be sparsely defended, it seemed prudent to deploy for battle rather than advance without proper reconnaissance. Legate Megellus was a cautious man, Septimus thought.

Within five minutes the forty maniples of the Ninth had deployed into battle formation and the air grew quiet again as they waited patiently for the order to advance. Septimus blinked a bead of sweat from his eye, overcoming the urge to lift his hand and wipe his face, the ingrained discipline of the legions still strong in his blood. His gaze shifted left to right at the skirmishers who were now reaching the outskirts of the town, the closed shutters of the low whitewashed buildings



revealing nothing to the advancing soldiers. He watched as one of the *velites* negotiated his way around a tethered dog, the sharp bark of the mongrel breaking the silence before a yelp of pain cut the sound short. In the centre of his vision, the approach road to the town was crowded by a detachment of the *velites*, their commander signalling orders as they prepared to advance into the town proper.

Septimus dropped his gaze, ignoring the unspoken order of eyes front as he sensed a tiny vibration beneath his feet. His mind registered and processed the sensation within a heartbeat, triggering a memory and a corresponding sense of alarm. As if to confirm his dread a sound began to fill the air around him, a sound like distant thunder to the uninitiated, but unmistakable to a veteran. His mouth began to form the warning but a dozen other men in the rear ranks beat him to it, their uncoordinated voices overlapping into a jumble of sound, but their warning nonetheless distinctive.

‘Enemy cavalry to the rear!’

The low sun blazed into Hamilcar’s eyes as he crested the hill and he blinked away the momentary blindness, his eyes taking in the entire vista before him in an instant. To his left, a mile away and less than two hundred yards from the town, the Roman legions seemed to be in disarray but Hamilcar’s military eye could see they were deploying into a battle formation, their cohesion evident even at this range. His gaze did not linger long on the enemy however, but shifted to a point directly across from his own on the other hill flanking the valley approach to *Thermae*. He was half way down the slope, his men following en masse behind, before he spotted the second attack force breach the top of the hill, the second unit of five hundred cavalry that would link with his own on the valley floor.





Hamilcar wheeled his horse into the centre of the valley and his men formed a line of battle on his flanks as they continued at the gallop. He straightened up in the saddle, shifting his weight and locking his legs against the barrel of his mount. His horse, a veteran herself of many battles, sensed the shift and, raising her head slightly, allowed Hamilcar to guide her with his legs, thereby freeing his hands from the reins. He reached behind and drew his sword from the scabbard strapped to his back, drawing the blade in a high arc, a fluid motion that signalled to his men the commitment to battle.

Hamilcar set his gaze firmly on the Roman formation a thousand yards in front of him. He had prepared for this moment for the past three months, from the day he had watched Hannibal Gisco suffer and die on the cross, punishment for the arrogance that had been the Carthaginians' undoing at Mylae. He had marshalled his forces and then almost immediately concealed them, hiding them from the Roman enemy who sailed unopposed across north-eastern Sicily. He had surreptitiously watched their every move, expecting and then confirming the imminent attack on Thermae and with tempered hate he had laid his trap. Now Hamilcar's eyes glazed over as he muttered a prayer to Anath, the Carthaginian goddess of war, for her favour in ensuring the enemy had approached unawares. With her good grace he prayed the Roman fleet had advanced under the same veil of ignorance and arrogance. As his vision cleared, the enemy ranks, although still eight hundred yards distant, seemed to fill his vision. A visceral war cry reared up within him and he roared his defiance at the Romans, a shout that was taken up by the thousand men who followed him without question.

*





‘Attack speed!’ Atticus commanded.

The whip cracks below decks intensified at the order as the two hundred slaves of the *Aquila* worked to get the trireme up to eleven knots, the drum beat intensifying, the heightened rhythm triggering the adrenaline to rise in Atticus’s veins at the anticipation of battle. The Carthaginian line was less than three hundred yards away, nine triremes and one quinquereme in line abreast formation perpendicular to the dock, their hulls pointing directly at the Roman advance.

‘Captain . . .’ Lucius remarked slowly, standing at Atticus’s shoulder.

‘I see it . . .’ Atticus replied, his mind racing. The enemy decks were swarming with activity but Atticus noticed they weren’t getting underway. In fact, they were showing no signs of advancing.

The Carthaginians’ strength was in ramming their enemy. For that they needed sea room and that space was rapidly being eroded by the Roman vanguard advancing at speed. In less than a minute it would be too late and they would be sitting ducks.

‘Or the perfect bait,’ Atticus realised suddenly. He whipped around to look out over the aft-rail to the headlands encasing the harbour and the entire fleet of Roman galleys now enclosed within them. ‘Poseidon protect us!’ he whispered.

‘Masthead lookout!’ Atticus shouted, ‘Check out approach, beyond the harbour mouth!’

Corin immediately turned from the impending battle and looked out over the low lying headlands. From fifty feet below Atticus could clearly see the sudden look of alarm on the lookout’s face and dread filled his stomach.

‘Enemy ships approaching from the east!’ Corin roared, pointing to the harbour mouth and the rush of Carthaginian galleys entering at battle speed.





Atticus was already running to the main deck as Corin shouted the alarm, the captain seeking Lucius out amongst the throng of men surrounding the mainmast. He spotted him immediately, his bull-like stature pushing through the legionaries as he too sought his commander.

‘Lucius! Get aloft. I want a full count including formation!’ Atticus ordered, knowing the inexperienced Corin wasn’t up to the vital task.

Lucius nodded and dashed to the running rigging, grasping the rope with his calloused hands and nimbly climbing arm over arm to the head of the mainmast.

‘Drusus!’

Immediately the acting centurion was at Atticus’s side.

‘Have your men form up on the foredeck behind the *corvus*. Once you have control of the enemy main deck I want you to fire her and retreat. Don’t engage below decks.’

Drusus saluted, his clenched fist slamming into his chest armour. He turned and issued terse orders to his men, the soldiers breaking ranks to reform on the fore. Atticus hesitated a moment to watch him. He was an *optio* of the Fourth legion who had been drafted to the marines as Septimus’s second-in-command. With the centurion absent, Drusus was in full command of the marines, a position he had never held before in a naval battle. He was a quiet man who kept his own counsel, but Atticus knew him to be a strict disciplinarian and he followed orders to the letter, never questioning a command or commander. But he lacked experience and Atticus realised he would need to guide both galley and marines in the fight to come.

‘Thirty enemy galleys!’ Lucius roared suddenly from the masthead and Atticus lifted his gaze. ‘Three quinqueremes in the van! Moving in arrow formation!’

‘Captain!’ Varro shouted, breaking Atticus’s concentration, ‘What’s going on?’





‘A trap, Tribune,’ Atticus said brusquely, not looking at the Varro but at the Carthaginian galley to the *Aquila*’s fore, now less than a hundred yards away, ‘and we sailed right into it.’

‘A trap?’ Varro repeated, a slight edge of apprehension in his voice, his confidence of minutes before suddenly challenged.

‘Ready the *corvus*!’ Atticus shouted, watching Gaius from the corner of his eye as the helmsman lined up the bow of the *Aquila*.

‘What are you doing?’ Varro asked, his previous command forgotten. ‘We must withdraw.’

‘No!’ Atticus said angrily but then immediately instantly calmed his voice, needing the tribune to understand. ‘We must attack, Tribune. We’re too close, too committed. We need to wipe out the threat to our front before we turn. Otherwise we’ll be forced to fight on two fronts.’

Varro looked away, his face twisted in uncertainty, his eyes darting left and right. Atticus turned his attention once more to the attack.

With twenty yards to go Drusus ordered his *hastati* to release their javelins, the final prelude to attack that would shatter any confluence of men on the Carthaginian foredeck. The *Aquila* shuddered as the seventy ton galley struck the unyielding hull of the Carthaginian ship and the *corvus* was instantly released, its thirty-six foot length hammering down onto the enemy deck, the three foot long spikes on the underside of the ramp crashing into the seasoned pine of the enemy fore, securing the two galleys together in a deadly embrace. Only then did the legionaries roar, their bloodthirsty cry filling their hearts with anger and courage. Within seconds Drusus led all sixty of his men across and a battle line was formed at the head of the Carthaginian galley, the interlocking four-foot *scutum* shields of the legionaries creating an impenetrable



barrier against which the *Punici* could not stand. Slowly and inexorably the Romans began their advance, their swords finding the gaps between the shields, each thrust searching for and finding the flesh of the enemy as man after man fell beneath Roman iron. The noise of battle carried clearly down the length of the *Aquila* to the aft-deck; cries of anger and pain mixed with the clash of weapons. It was a sound like no other in the world and Atticus was transfixed by the sight before him, the vicious struggle that he had known half his life, first as a pirate hunter and now as a galley captain in the war against the *Punici*.

Septimus gritted his teeth as he ran, almost stumbling as he favoured his right leg. All around him the sound of officer's commands filled the air, their voices raised above the sound of five thousand men running towards the outer buildings of *Thermae*; their orders tightly controlling the panic that lingered just under the surface of every Roman infantryman at the thought of being caught in the open against enemy cavalry.

Septimus's vision was filled with the throng of men in front of him but his senses also picked up the advance of the Carthaginians behind; the approaching thunder that infused the very air and his mind calculated their proximity from the sound. Less than two hundred yards. They weren't going to make it and Septimus heard the legate issue a desperate order to try and check the Carthaginian charge.

'Hastati! Prepare to form ranks!'

Septimus ran on through the assembling ranks of the junior soldiers, each one preparing to deploy their *pila* javelins over the heads of the retreating legionaries, the decision to deploy them a desperate gamble to give the rest of the legion time to take cover. The troops were crowded together in the gaps between the buildings and on the main road into the town.

Septimus pushed himself out of the throng and into an island of calm against the bare whitewashed wall of a house. He drew his sword and immediately began to command the men at the crush points to his left and right, his voice reprimanding the soldiers who were pushing those in front, ensuring that panic did not ripple across the men frantically vying for the safety of the town. He looked back towards the approaching enemy, their primeval war cries almost drowning the orders of the centurions commanding the *hastati*. The junior soldiers stood with their feet apart, braced for the throw of their weapons against the enemy bearing down on them. It was a sight to see and Septimus felt his pride swell at the fortitude of the younger men, many of whom had never faced down a cavalry charge. His trained eye judged the distance between the forces, counting the yards off in his head. At thirty yards they would release and the *hastati* would break for cover. Whether they reached it or not depended on the enemy's courage.

Septimus instinctively muttered the command a heartbeat before the shouted order of 'Loose!' released fury upon the enemy.

Twelve hundred javelins were released as one, their trajectory almost flat at the short range and they hung in the air for a mere second before crashing into the enemy ranks, the iron point of each six foot spear slamming indiscriminately into the exposed flesh of the enemy with Fortuna's hand separating the lucky from the damned. For an instant the force of the charge was repressed, its momentum struck as horses and men fell under the weight of Roman iron. Time slowed as Septimus locked his gaze on the front ranks of the enemy. From where he stood he could see the individual expression of each man and witness the critical moment when their courage would either rear up in defiance or collapse. It passed



and his body moved before his mind could fully register the outcome, his survival instinct faster than his conscious mind.

Septimus was already through the now empty gap between the houses behind him when the order for the *hastati* to break was given. Only then did he replay in his mind the sight he had just seen, the moment to which he had borne witness. The Carthaginians had never wavered. They had run over their own dead and injured without check and the air behind Septimus was ripped by the terrible sound of the enemy cavalry striking the exposed ranks of the *hastati* as they scabbled the remaining yards to the cover that many of them would never reach.

Hamilcar roared in triumph as a spray of Roman blood fell across his face, the legionary beneath his blade pitching backward with his arms outstretched; his chest slashed open, his defiant stand when all around him fled, ended by a Phoenician blade. Hamilcar continued the swing of his blade over his head as his mount thundered on, the momentum of their combined charge bringing the sword down with savage speed onto the helmet of another fleeing soldier, the forge-welded blade slicing cleanly through the thin metal helmet, dropping the legionary instantly.

All around Hamilcar the Carthaginian line enveloped the fleeing Romans, the slaughter unopposed as the exposed *hastati* ran for cover, many of them dropping their weapons in a futile attempt to speed their flight, the front ranks left with too far to run. They paid for the precious seconds they had given their comrades with their lives. Hamilcar violently reined in his mount only yards short of one of the outer buildings of the town while to his left and right more Carthaginians continued to butcher the bottlenecked legionaries. He drew his forearm across his mouth, tasting the blood of his enemy



as he wiped the stain away, his heightened senses capturing each second of his first close-contact fight with the Romans.

A cheer erupted from the Carthaginians as the last of the Romans fell or fled, the men wheeling their mounts in tight circles as they held their swords aloft in triumph. Hamilcar scanned the scene around him. Fifty yards to his rear he spied his fallen men, their number laid out in a line marking the fall of the Roman spears, their loss repaid fourfold by the number of dead Romans who littered the horse-trampled ground and the Roman cavalry so easily dispatched in ambush only an hour before. Cries and alarm cut through the cheering and Hamilcar spun around to see a flight of Roman spears erupt from the confines of the town, the untargeted volleys falling loosely amongst his troops.

‘Withdraw!’ he roared, his men instantly obeying, galloping out of range of their unseen foe.

‘Commander!’ Hamilcar shouted as he spun his mount around fifty yards from the town. A senior cavalry officer was immediately by his side.

‘Re-form the line,’ he ordered. ‘Have your men rush any Roman who appears but do not attempt to breach the town.’

The officer saluted and galloped down the line, shouting orders as he did, the men falling back once more into a battle line that effectively imprisoned the Romans in Thermae. Hamilcar watched the officer for a minute, his gaze ranging over the extended formation, the expressions of his men still manic from the frenzied attack only moments before. They would need a firm hand to keep them in check and the uneasy stomp of their horses’ forelegs betrayed the pent-up aggression of the riders. Let loose they would charge the very heart of the town, their blood lust blinding them to the danger of attacking infantry in enclosed streets where their superior speed and manoeuvrability would count for naught. He watched



as discipline reasserted itself, and turned his attention back to the town. Between the buildings and on the entrance road he could see a multitude of red cloth and burnished steel, the Romans rushing across his line of sight as their officers fought to regain control of their shattered formations. Hamilcar smiled although his eyes remained cold. No fewer than four hundred Romans lay dead before him and yet the wound to his pride was still raw, his heart calling for greater vengeance. He spurred his mount and raced off towards the southern end of the town and to the flank that would take him quickest to the shores of the inner harbour. As he rode he looked back once more over his shoulder and to the cavalry that had wrought such slaughter. Their fight was fought and won. Now Hamilcar would unleash the next wave, the attack that would wipe out the Romans and restore his honour.



‘By the Gods . . .’ Atticus whispered as a horde of Carthaginian soldiers suddenly emerged from the hatchways of the Carthaginian galley now transfixed to the *Aquila*. There were scores of them, many more than the normal complement of a Carthaginian galley; a multitude rushing towards the thin battle line of Drusus’s men. They stormed forward as one, the weight of their charge barely checked by the disciplined legionaries as they were pushed onto the defensive by a number three times their own.



A cheer emanated from the Carthaginian galley on the *Aquila*’s left flank and Atticus spun around to see the Roman line of the *Minerva* collapse under a similar assault, the legionaries retreating across the *corvus* as the enemy followed them onto the deck of the Roman galley. Atticus spun around to the waters of the outer harbour behind him. The Carthaginian galleys were forming a battle line across the width of the harbour, but Atticus noticed that they were slowing





their advance and he hesitated, his mind racing to understand the enemy's rationale, why they were not attacking. He swept aside the question and turned once more.

'Lucius!' Atticus shouted, his voiced raised above the Punic war cries that carried from the *Minerva* not thirty yards away, 'All hands forward, send a runner across to Drusus and tell him to withdraw. We'll cover his retreat!'

'Yes, Captain.' Lucius replied and was away.

As Atticus ordered his crew forward, the first flight of arrows from the enemy on board the *Minerva* flew across the narrow gap between the galleys and struck the main deck of the *Aquila*. A shiver ran down Atticus's spine as an arrow swept past him and he fought to suppress it, standing resolute in the centre of his ship. He muttered his familiar prayer to Fortuna, knowing that if her hand was upon him this day he would live to see another. If not then Hades, the Lord of the Dead, would take him across the Acheron before the sun set. He felt his nerve strengthen as he ended his prayer, the initial panic every soldier felt at the start of close combat quickly subsiding within him and like countless times before, with a warrior's heart, he gave his life to fate.

Atticus looked beyond the fight before him to the buildings surrounding the docks of Thermae and his thoughts strayed to Septimus. If the fleet had been baited into a trap then surely the legion had suffered the same fate. He turned to the town beyond the inner harbour and as his eyes strayed over the whitewashed buildings he saw a fire arrow take flight, its golden orange tip followed by a black tail of smoke that stood out against the cobalt sky. Even above the noise of battle all around him, Atticus clearly heard the visceral war cry emanating from the bowels of the town and he instinctively recited his prayer once more, this time for his friend.

*





The dread war cry of the *Punici* whipped through the still air, the sound causing Septimus to turn his head to the western end of the town and the source of the cry, the men who roared it as yet unseen beyond the confines of the narrow streets now crammed with legionaries. High above his head he spied a lone fire arrow, its purpose immediately clear as a roar emanated from the eastern end of Thermae and the enemy on the reverse flank. Septimus immediately began to form the men around him, his officer's voice joining the confusing disharmony of commands as centurions and *optios* fought to bring a semblance of order to the chaos.

The Ninth had run into Thermae in confusion, the ordered formations created on the open space at the edge of the town destroyed as the men fled the Carthaginian cavalry. Septimus searched around him for the banner of the IV maniple and the men under Marcus's command but it was nowhere to be seen within his field of vision, a scene choked with men pushing and shoving to regain their own units.

The war cries to the west intensified and Septimus charged his shield in that direction, the men around him following suit, many taking their lead from the taller centurion in their midst. Septimus frantically looked for a unit of *hastati*, the sequence of defence ingrained into his command psyche but none were intact and he realised that even if a unit were available there wasn't enough room for them to deploy and release their spears in the crush of men. With a rush of understanding he realised the brilliance of the Carthaginians' trap. A Roman legion was born and bred on an open battlefield where her ordered formations were impenetrable. In the narrow confines of a town, without room to manoeuvre, the disciplined structure that made the legions near unbeatable was lost.

The blare of a Roman military trumpet reverberated through





the streets, Septimus spinning around to find its source. An order rippled down through the street. 'Fighting retreat to the docks!' a centurion shouted and Septimus repeated the order to all within his own earshot, continuing the relay of the order. Soldiers began to push back past Septimus as they made for the centre of the town and the road to the docks while others stood confused and dazed, lost without their unit. Septimus stood firm, his eyes locked on the street ahead of him, unable to see beyond the abrupt turn to the right not thirty yards from his position. A number of *principes*, the battle-hardened core of the legion, spotted Septimus's stand and fell in behind him, creating a wedge of men that separated the flow like the cutwater of a galley.

The sound of the oncoming enemy filled the air around, their voices now intermingled with the sound of their running footfalls, the noise ricocheting off the walls of the town, tricking the ear so Septimus was forced to turn his head left and right to judge the distance of direction of the oncoming onslaught.

'Form line!' he roared, the soldiers spreading out across the twenty foot wide street to form a shield wall.

Septimus took his place immediately behind the first line, his gaze sweeping over the men around him, their insignia from a dozen different maniples marking them as strangers but their uniform making them one. The wall of sound to their front increased in intensity and Septimus focused his attention on the corner to their front.

'Steady, boys!' Septimus growled, 'Steady!'

The men in front of Septimus visibly bunched their shoulders into the back of their shields, bracing themselves against the rush of enemy that was bearing down on them.

'Here they come!'

Septimus watched with a determined expression as the first





of the *Punici* raced around the corner towards them. Their pace checked for a heartbeat at the sight of the shield wall but their expressions of pure aggression never varied and they ran headlong without pause.

‘Steady the line!’ Septimus shouted.

The legionaries roared a primeval battle cry in response, acknowledging the order. Steady the line. Not one step back until the enemy was held.

The Carthaginians crashed against the front line as one, their momentum absorbed and then repelled by men tempered in the forge of the Roman legions. The legionaries heaved forward against the press of the enemy, creating gaps between their shields through which they fed their *gladius* swords, the iron blade seeking a death stroke against an enemy’s groin or stomach. The *Punici* battered the wood and canvas shields, hammering the iron edging, their brute strength fuelled by their hatred of the Roman aggressor. A legionary fell, then another, their place rapidly filled as Septimus fed replacements into the breach.

‘Fighting retreat!’ Septimus shouted. The line was strong and holding but the weight of the enemy against it was increasing with every passing second. The battle around Septimus filled his senses, the sound of iron on iron, wood and flesh, the incoherent overwhelming war cries mixed with cries of pain and death, the smell of blood and voided bowels as dead men fell beneath the butcher’s blade.

‘Hold!’ Atticus growled to his men on the foredeck, ‘Steady, boys!’

The crew of the *Aquila* were fanned out on each side of the *corvus*, with archers deployed on the forerail, the men forming a funnel through which the legionaries could retreat in order. Atticus was given a second to look around him and



he spotted Varro standing near the back of the line. He stood amongst his own personal guard, commanded by a veteran of the legions named Vitulus. In front of these many of the older senators, former military commanders in their own right, had drawn their swords, their time spent in the legions commanding their actions even now in their later years.

With one fluid movement Atticus drew his sword, the iron blade singing against the scabbard, his arm instantly accepting the familiar weight of the weapon. The rear ranks of Drusus's men had reached the *corvus* and they were edging back along it. Within a minute the front rank, Drusus amongst them, were coming across the boarding ramp, his line continuously pushed by the press of Carthaginian warriors to his fore, the enemy war cries increasing in ferocity as they sought to board the Roman galley.

As the last of the legionaries crossed, the crew of the *Aquila* instantly engaged. Atticus took a step to his front as a Punic warrior pushed towards him, a battle axe in his hand. The Carthaginian swung the axe high and Atticus collapsed his body into a defensive stance, coming to his full height – again chest to chest with the enemy fighter, instantly stabbing upward and behind with his sword, the blade biting deeply into the exposed kidneys of his enemy, the man collapsing with a cry of pain. Atticus fought on without check, his instincts screaming at him to rush the enemy before they could form a coherent bridgehead on the foredeck of the *Aquila*, his heart damning any man who would dare to set foot on his galley.

Varro roared in dread-filled defiance, his voice lost amongst the roar of battle. The six legionaries of his guard stood directly in front of him, their shields interlocked in a bid to stave off the Carthaginian horde that had swept over the *corvus* seconds before. Vitulus stood to Varro's fore, methodically driving his



sword through the gap between his shield and the man's to his right. Varro stood riveted to his spot, his own sword still sheathed, furious that he had been drawn into the front line of the battle, forced to advance by the senators who had answered the captain's call for all hands forward without hesitation, leaving Varro with little choice but to follow or risk accusations of cowardice. Now his mind was flooded with anxiety, praying he would survive, while struggling to understand the sudden reversal of his fate. An hour before he had watched with mounting elation as his fleet had swept unopposed into the harbour of Thermae. Fortuna's wheel had turned and the easy victory he had foreseen was transforming into bloody butchery before his eyes.

Atticus felt the pressure of the Carthaginian attack ease to his front as he heard the disciplined commands of the legionaries to his rear, their line re-forming, their sudden reverse causing even the most fearsome Carthaginian boarders to waver. Within a frenzied minute the Romans checked and then began to repel the invaders, making the enemy pay for every inch of the *Aquila's* deck they had taken.

'Fire their deck!' Atticus shouted to his archers and they shot fire arrows across the narrow divide bridged by the *corvus* to the rigging and deck of the Carthaginian galley. The fire wouldn't take enough of a hold to consume the galley but it would certainly disable her as the crew fought to bring it under control.

'Raise the *corvus*! Full reverse!' Atticus roared, as the remnants of the now retreating Carthaginians struggled to make their way back across the boarding ramp, many of them falling into the churning waters, the ramp beneath them tilting violently. The two hundred oars of the *Aquila* dug deeply into the calm waters and with incredible skill Gaius backed the *Aquila* away from the Carthaginian galley to their front.





‘Enemy galley on ramming course!’

Atticus spun around at the sound of the frantic cry from the masthead and dread filled his stomach as he saw one of the Carthaginian galleys bearing down on them at ramming speed. Only a few of the enemy ships had advanced from their line across the outer harbour, an insufficient number to overpower the rapidly disengaging Roman ships. Again Atticus was left confused by the enemy’s tactics.

‘Gaius!’ he shouted. ‘Evasive manoeuvres . . . now!’

The helmsman threw his weight behind the tiller and the deck of the *Aquila* keeled violently as Gaius fought to bring the exposed stern of the galley around and out of range of the vicious ram of the Carthaginian galley.

‘Captain!’

Atticus looked around to find Drusus striding towards him across the main deck, his shield hanging loosely by his side, the boss dented and blood-stained, his face streaked with the filth of battle.

‘The clarion call,’ he said, his expression uncharacteristically concerned, ‘from *Thermae*.’

‘What of it?’ Atticus asked, recalling the trumpet sound he had heard just after he saw the fire arrow in flight over the town.

‘It was a call for full retreat, Captain.’

Atticus paused for a second as the full meaning of Drusus’s concern hit home. Full retreat. For five thousand men of the Ninth. Where could they retreat to?

Septimus glanced over his shoulder as he rounded yet another corner and he smiled coldly at the sight behind him. A solid line of Roman *hastati*, their javelins held at the ready. He turned to the line again and sensed then saw *pila* javelins fly over his head into the rear ranks of the enemy attack.



The Carthaginians hesitated at the unexpected onslaught, checking their ferocity as they spotted the massed ranks of the reformed and reorganised Ninth at the end of the street. For a heartbeat indecision swept through them before a second volley of javelins was released from the Roman ranks, each iron-tipped spear finding a target in the narrow confines of the street. The rear ranks of the Carthaginians fled to take refuge in the preceding street, the front line hesitating for a second more before the momentum of the retreat behind them caused them to turn and run.

The Roman line opened to allow Septimus and his men to withdraw and the centurion scanned the mass of men behind the line. Many had escaped the initial assault, but Septimus knew the reprieve would not last long. The Carthaginians would rally and although Septimus was now surrounded by hundreds of Roman soldiers rather than dozens, the odds were still overwhelmingly stacked against them.

A wave of sea spray swept over Septimus's face as he rounded the final street to the docks, the air laden with smoke and the distinctive sounds of a naval battle. He took in the entire vista of the harbour with one sweep, his heart sinking at the sight. The docks were crammed with soldiers, their ranks still meshed together, but Septimus could now discern a semblance of order amongst the troops, the solid defensive line he had passed through bore witness to the discipline that had been reasserted upon the Ninth. At the centre of the throng Septimus spotted the banner of the legate, the rallying point for the legion's commanders, and he made his way towards the confluence of officers. He spotted Marcus as he approached, the grizzled centurion barking orders to an *optio* who ran off with a brief salute.

'Marcus!' Septimus shouted, his call causing the older man to spin around.



‘Septimus you young pup, where have you been shirking?’ he asked, his face betraying his relief.

Septimus smiled and punched the centurion’s breastplate. ‘We were held up by a wall of Carthaginians!’ he replied.

Marcus nodded but his face turned grave. ‘We’re trapped, Septimus, completely cut off.’

Septimus nodded. He had realised as much. ‘What’s the plan?’ he asked.

‘Megellus wants to evacuate the *hastati* by sea and then he’s going to lead a break-out east towards Brolium with the remaining troops.’

Septimus nodded, his mind recalling the briefing of two days before. The coast to the east was defined by a small range of mountains, no place for cavalry. He turned his head, his eyes drawn to the naval battle out in the harbour. It was chaotic, a tangle of interlocked galleys, many of them ablaze. As Septimus’s gaze swept the inner harbour his heart lifted at the sight of the *Aquila*, the trireme running parallel to the shore, pulling away from a burning Carthaginian galley. Her aft-deck was crowded and Septimus could not pick out Atticus but he could clearly see Lucius, his familiar stature standing at the side rail to receive the message being relayed to every passing galley from the Legate of the Ninth.

Atticus’s gaze swept over the sea of red crowding the docks of Thermae. The Ninth was completely trapped by the unseen Punic forces but even Atticus, unschooled in legionary tactics, knew that the legion’s strength lay in open territory and not in the rat’s maze of a coastal town. Lucius approached him from the side-rail.

‘Message from the legate to the fleet,’ he began. ‘He requests that we evacuate the *hastati* by sea.’

Atticus nodded before scanning the entire harbour, his





mind calculating the number of men to be evacuated versus the remaining Roman galleys still capable of answering the call.

‘Heave to!’ Atticus ordered Gaius, ‘Lucius, signal every galley in sight to clear their decks and begin the evacuation.’

‘No!’

Every head on the aft-deck spun around to the aft-rail. Varro was standing there alone, his face twisted into a murderous glare.

‘We will withdraw . . . before it’s too late!’ he said, stumbling slightly as he walked towards Atticus.

‘But, Tribune . . .’ one of the senators began, stepping into Varro’s path, the young man pushing the senator aside.

‘No! We are beaten. We cannot risk being attacked again, being . . .’ Varro’s voice trailed off, his expression revealing the fear in his heart, his eyes darting to the solid wall of Carthaginian galleys spread across the harbour.

Atticus turned his back on the tribune, knowing every passing minute was vital.

‘Come about three points to starboard. Prepare to dock!’ he shouted.

‘No!’ Varro roared, ‘I forbid it. We must escape while we can!’

‘Tribune,’ a senator said, his hand gripping Varro’s elbow, ‘we must help the Ninth.’

‘No,’ Varro repeated, shrugging the senator’s grip aside, pushing his way forward again until he stood behind Gaius and Atticus.

‘Steady, Gaius,’ Atticus said, ignoring Varro, ‘Ready to withdraw oars!’

The tribune reached out and grabbed Atticus’s arm, spinning him around until his face was inches from Atticus’s.

‘Damn you,’ Varro roared, his gaze filled with anger and



frustration, 'I order you to turn this galley around and get us out of here!'

Atticus stepped back, his fists bunched, anger coursing through his veins. Varro had rammed his galley into the gaping maw of battle without hesitation, his glory-laced dreams quickly shattered by reality in the quick of combat, the lives of many men already forfeit to his ignorance. Now he was willing to sacrifice the life of every Roman in Thermae just to save his own.

'Did you hear me, Captain?' Varro shouted, 'I order . . .'

Varro's words were cut short as Atticus struck him with an open hand across the cheek. The tribune staggered with the blow, his hand flying to his face as he tried to stand upright, the pain of his split upper lip stunning him. Atticus put out his hand to steady Varro but as he did Atticus spotted Vitulus advancing from behind the tribune, the legionary's hand sweeping across to grab the hilt of his sword. Atticus made to react when he sensed then saw an extended sword to his right as Lucius stepped forward to defend his captain. Vitulus's eyes swept from Atticus to Lucius and he halted his advance, his hand still holding the hilt of his sword but the blade remaining sheathed. He backed off a pace, turning his gaze once more to Atticus, his eyes conveying a thinly veiled warning.

'Lucius,' Atticus said, putting his hand out to lower Lucius's blade, 'Take the tribune below to the main cabin. See that he stays there for his own protection until we clear Thermae.'

Lucius nodded without a word and sheathed his sword before taking Varro by the arm, the stunned youth offering no resistance as he was led away.

Atticus sobered for a second, remembering that there were four senators on the aft-deck, each one witness to his insubordination and the crime of striking a commanding officer,



a crime punishable by summary execution. His eyes caught those of the senator who had stepped across Varro's path. The senator held Atticus's gaze for a second before nodding imperceptibly, his decision made, and turned his back and looked out over the side rail. The other three senators watched his gesture intently and they each followed suit without hesitation, understanding and agreeing with his decision. Each had fought bravely when the *Punici* had boarded, moving into the battle line without hesitation. They were all former warriors who, as in countless times in their youth, shed their fear and stepped up to the fight. They had been ashamed of Varro's behaviour, the overt fear that shamed his rank, and so now they turned their backs. They had witnessed nothing.

Atticus inwardly sighed at the reprieve and turned his attention to the docks once more. He looked to his hand and found that it was shaking, a combination of anger and pure adrenaline at the foolhardy risk he had just taken. For a heartbeat he thought of Varro and the shocked demeanour of the young man after he had been struck. Atticus had seen that look many times before, the shock of physical violence from those who were unaccustomed to it. The feeling would not last and Atticus had no doubt that although the senators might deny that they had seen the strike, Varro would not forget the insult.

'All *principes* and *triarii* to stand in the defensive line. *Hastati* to form ranks at the docks!'

As the order was repeated across the ranks of the Ninth, Septimus began to make his way back to the defensive line. An outstretched arm stayed his progress.

'Where do you think you're going?' Marcus asked.

'To the line,' Septimus replied automatically, not understanding the question.





‘The hell you are!’ Marcus said. ‘This is not your fight.’

‘But . . .’ Septimus began but Marcus cut him short.

‘You’re a marine Centurion, Septimus. Your duty lies with your galley and your men.’

Septimus made to protest again but Marcus ignored him, shouting over his shoulder, ‘Signifier of the IV!’

Within seconds the standard bearer of the IV maniple was at their side.

‘Septimus,’ Marcus began, ‘I need you to do me a favour.’

‘Another one?’ Septimus smiled, already realising what Marcus was going to ask.

‘Take my *hastati* from the IV onto the *Aquila* and see them safely away.’

Septimus nodded, assuming the familiar mantle he had carried in the Ninth over two years before.

‘Yes, Centurion,’ Septimus replied, saluting the older man, his friend and former mentor.

Marcus punched Septimus’s breastplate twice, his expression friendly. He turned without another word and strode off towards the defensive line, the more experienced men of his maniple already deploying under the *optio* of the IV. Septimus watched him until he was lost in the crush of men crowded along the docks. Only then did he lower his salute.

Septimus spun around to find the Signifier standing firm, the *hastati* of the IV finding their way unerringly to the standard as ranks were formed all along the dock. Septimus noticed there were no more than twenty *hastati* remaining, less than half their original number, their comrades lost in the initial charge and subsequent street fighting.

‘Men of the IV, on me!’ Septimus shouted as he advanced towards the water’s edge, his eyes sweeping the inner harbour for the *Aquila* as the Roman galleys converged.

*





‘There!’ Atticus said, his outstretched hand pointing out the standard of the IV maniple. ‘Do you see it, Gaius?’

‘Yes, Captain,’ the helmsman replied and adjusted the *Aquila*’s course. Within a minute the galley was lined up with dock directly opposite the standard of Septimus’s old maniple where Atticus hoped to find his friend.

‘Steerage speed!’ the captain shouted, slowing the galley to two knots as Gaius brought the hull perpendicular to the dock.

‘All stop!’

The blades of two hundred oars were dropped into the water, creating a drag that stopped the *Aquila* within a half-ship length. The order was given to raise oars as the ram gently nudged the dock and the *corvus* was lowered. To the left and right another six galleys followed suit, their exposed sterns protected by a screen of three more Roman galleys that kept a constant vigil against the remaining Carthaginian galleys milling around the harbour, the confluence of Roman ships with their deadly *corvi* keeping them at bay for the moment.

Atticus walked down the main deck, his eyes never leaving the head of the *corvus*, trying to discern the familiar sight of his friend amongst the throng of battle weary soldiers. He spotted him almost immediately and stood directly in his path. As Septimus approached he held his hand out, the centurion smiling in recognition. They shook hands, legionary style, with hands gripping forearms. Atticus slapped Septimus on the shoulder, the smile never leaving his face. He hadn’t seen his friend since Mylae.

‘Welcome home,’ Atticus said, as the legionaries pushed around them, the main deck becoming ever more crowded.

Septimus nodded, his gaze taking in every detail of the galley he had served on for over a year, the rise and fall of





the deck beneath his feet unfamiliar after so many months on land. He nodded. 'It's good to be back,' he replied.

The smile disappeared from his face as he looked over Atticus's shoulder to the carnage of the outer harbour.

'What are our chances?' he asked.

'We'll see,' Atticus replied. 'What are the Legate's plans?'

'He's going to break out east with the *principes* and *triarii*.'

Atticus nodded. He looked over his shoulder and counted the Roman galleys within sight. Enough to take the *hastati* but no more. The rest of the Ninth would be left to Fortuna's whim.

The *Aquila* pushed off minutes later, her full complement now supplemented by an additional eighty legionaries from the Ninth legion. The other Roman galleys unconsciously formed on the flanks of the *Aquila* as they turned from the inner harbour, their bows re-creating an arrow-head formation. There were near twenty in total and Gaius set their course for the centre of the line in the outer harbour, a course that would hopefully shatter the line and allow the greatest number of Roman galleys to escape. On their flanks Atticus noticed the loose Carthaginian galleys that had advanced to the inner harbour coming back up to attack speed, hoping to pick off individual ships from the edges of the formation. He unconsciously gripped the side rail, his grip tightening until the knuckles showed white, his mind calculating the speed and course of every galley, friend and foe. They weren't all going to make it.

Hamilcar reined in his horse as he reached the shoreline, his gaze sweeping across the entire harbour. For a brief second his expression turned to one of puzzlement. Then it slowly transformed into frustration and then into twisted anger. There were no more than forty Carthaginian galleys in the





harbour, a number not much more than the Romans, the battle a nearly even contest instead of the overwhelming blow Hamilcar had planned. Where in Anath's name was the rest of the fleet? When he had left Panormus, the Carthaginians' main port on the northern coast of Sicily, over two weeks before, he had left an assembled fleet of one hundred galleys, each one fully manned and ready to sail, with orders to lay off Thermae in ambush.

Now only a fraction of that force was present and what was worse was that most were still following his original orders, forming a battle line to seal the harbour without fully engaging. That tactic was devised for a force of one hundred galleys; a force Hamilcar had been sure would coerce the trapped Romans into surrendering without a fight, but with the fleets more evenly balanced in numbers Hamilcar could see that the Romans were about to attempt to punch through the line.

Hamilcar noticed that some of his captains had had the intelligence to disregard his previous orders in light of the obvious change in the tactical situation but their attacks were uncoordinated and individual, their efforts insufficient to trigger the crushing defeat Hamilcar had wanted to inflict on the Romans. They were attacking on the flanks, picking off the exposed enemy galleys but the bulk of the Roman fleet continued without check, bearing down on the too shallow Carthaginian line.

Hamilcar's mount bucked wildly in fright beneath him and for the first time he realised he was screaming at the top of his lungs, his rage boiling over into a visceral challenge against the enemy that was going to escape annihilation and the unknown forces that had ruined his plan.

An almighty crack filled the air as a Carthaginian ram, driven by an eighty ton hull, smashed into the exposed timbers of a





Roman galley on the flank of the arrow formation, the strike accompanied by a demonic cheer from the *Punici*. The momentum of the blow pushed the stricken ship up onto the cutwater of the Punic galley and the crowded deck of the Roman galley tilted violently, throwing many of the evacuated legionaries into the churning waters of the harbour, their armour dragging them instantly below the waves. Atticus cursed as he witnessed the sight but he quickly returned his gaze to the waters ahead, watching as the Carthaginian line prepared to receive the full punch of the Roman attempt to break through.

‘Aspect change, dead ahead!’ Corin roared from the mast-head and Atticus sought the Punic galley that had turned into their course.

‘One point to starboard!’ he commanded and Gaius responded with an alacrity that bore testament to the intuitive bond between the captain and helmsman.

‘Punic galley on intercept course!’ Corin shouted and Atticus imperceptibly nodded his head, the Carthaginian’s course already obvious to all on the aft-deck.

‘Prepare to sweep to port!’ Atticus ordered.

Lucius rushed forward to the head of the gangway that led to the slave deck below, instantly relaying the captain’s order to the drum master. He stayed on station in that position, looking over his shoulder to Atticus, his entire attention now focused on the captain, his trust in the younger man absolute.

‘Septimus, prepare to deploy a shield wall, starboard side!’

The centurion arranged his men just shy of the starboard rail, their shields ready to overlap to form a protective barrier against the imminent hail of incoming missiles.

Atticus moved to beside Gaius as the helmsman lined up the *Aquila*’s hull, the finely balanced one hundred and thirty foot keel reacting to the smallest of touches. For a brief second





he watched Gaius work, watching him weave the chimera that lulled the Carthaginians into thinking the Roman galley was committed to a frontal assault.

At eleven knots the *Aquila* closed the final hundred yards in seconds, the drum beat controlling her speed never changing as Lucius ordered the one hundred slaves of the starboard side to prepare to withdraw. They acknowledged the order without breaking stride, their bodies collectively tensing in anticipation of the command to follow, their minds long ago conditioned by the whip to follow commands blindly and without hesitation.

At twenty yards distance the Carthaginians screamed in belligerence, their ranks massed on the foredeck, ready to receive and repel the Roman legionaries. Atticus felt Gaius tense in expectation and he roared the order without conscious thought.

‘Withdraw!’

The command crew moved almost simultaneously, Gaius sidestepping the *Aquila* to port as Lucius relayed the order below decks while Septimus deployed his ranks to the starboard rail. Within three strokes the slaves raised oars and hand-over-hand withdrew them until only the blades of the oars were exposed outside the hull.

Gaius leaned into the tiller as he re-righted the *Aquila*’s course, bringing her back to a line parallel to the Carthaginian galley, not ten feet from the hull. Punic cries of alarm and rage filled the air as the cutwater of the *Aquila* struck the forward extended oars of the Carthaginian galley, the fifteen foot pine oars snapping against the relentless seventy-ton hull, the screams of the slaves manning the oars drowning out all sound save the crack of shattered wood. Many of the Carthaginians reacted instantly to the reversal of fortune, life-long battle instincts dictating their response as they released





flights of arrows across a flat trajectory to the Roman galley, their volleys made impotent by the wall of legionaries' shields.

'Re-engage oars!' Atticus shouted as the *Aquila* cleared the hull of the Carthaginian galley.

The starboard oars were extended once more and the *Aquila*'s speed of eleven knots took her out of effective arrow range within seconds, the crew of the now disabled Punic ship left to scream curses across the widening gap. Atticus ignored the shouts and turned his full attention to the formation behind him, watching them as they bunched together to breach the gap the *Aquila* had created and they poured through the line.

A spontaneous cheer erupted from many of the young *hastati* on the deck of the *Aquila* as the galley breached the confines of the harbour and struck out into the open sea. It was a cheer that was not repeated by the experienced men of the galley, Atticus and Septimus amongst them as they stood together on the aft-deck. Atticus's gaze was locked on a forlorn Roman galley, the *Opis*, still fighting in the midst of hell in the outer harbour. She had been cut off from the formation and the Carthaginians were turning on her like a pack of hyenas, unleashing their fury at the escape of so many of the Roman galleys by slaughtering the few who remained, the desperate cries of the Romans diminishing as the last of them fell under Phoenician swords. Septimus was looking beyond the naval battle to the docks and thought of the Ninth legion that had long been his home and family, a bond that had been re-awakened over the past three months. Their breakout would be desperation itself, a knife edge existence between retreat and rout for the near three thousand men that remained and Septimus could not bring himself to believe that more than a third would see Brolium again.





‘Raise sail, withdraw oars!’ Atticus commanded, finally turning his back on Thermae. The order was repeated on the seventeen Roman galleys sailing in the *Aquila’s* wake, the remnants of a shattered fleet. The last of the adrenaline in Atticus’s blood began to dissipate and he suddenly felt cold and exhausted, weary to his soul. Three months before the *Classis Romanus* had swept the sea clear of the enemy, a great victory that made all believe, even Atticus, that the new Roman fleet had reversed and destroyed the three hundred year old superiority of the Punic fleet with one fell swoop. It was a belief born from the confidence of fools and Atticus felt the bile of shame rise in his throat at the thought of his stupidity. They had not destroyed the behemoth, they had merely wounded it, and now the beast had reared its head in vengeance, a brutal retaliation that ran the waters of Thermae red with Roman blood.





CHAPTER TWO

He couldn't breathe; the fetid air was too thick, too laced with the smell of fear and human waste. His mind was filled with the sounds of despair, of men dying slowly in the pitch blackness. He tried to stand, to break out, but the ceiling closed in on him, pushing him down until he thought his back would break from the pressure. His skin began to crawl, the sensation assailing his extremities first, forcing him to draw his arms and legs until he was curled into a foetal position, the tiny filthy creatures finding every inch of his skin, feeling their way up his back and across his chest, their clicking sound smothering all other in his tormented mind. They reached his neck, and he stretched his head up with forlorn hope to escape them, their advance inexorable. The first of them touched his face, scuttling across his cheek and into his hair. It was followed by a dozen others, then a hundred, the clicking noise roaring in his ears; his face was alive with them.

Scipio shot up and screamed a cry of despair from the depths of his soul. His wife was instantly awake, her hand outstretched to touch her husband and release him from the bounds of his nightmare, the horrific dream that visited him every night without fail. He sat upright in the bed, swallowing huge breaths of air as if to cleanse his lungs, his eyes wide



open, focusing intently on the soft light of the lantern that was now constantly lit during the hours of darkness.

‘Gnaeus . . .’ Fabiola began, her voice gentle, searching for the man lost in that terrible place he had described to her only once, a place that had forever stolen part of his courage.

Scipio shrugged off her hand, throwing his feet out over the edge of the bed, resting his elbows on his knees as he rubbed the last vestiges of the nightmare from his face.

‘Go back to sleep Fabiola,’ he said knowing he himself would not sleep again that night. He rose and walked naked across the room, brushing aside the silken drapes that led to the cool night air of the balcony. On the lower reverse slope of the Capitoline Hill of Rome, the view from the balcony took in the flood plains of the Tiber, now bathed in the soft half-glow of a crescent moon. It was a beautiful calming sight but Scipio took no pleasure from it, his anger and shame still raw from the nightly reminder of his downfall.

Scipio had no idea how long he had been held prisoner in the lower hold of the Carthaginian galley after his capture at Lipara; weeks, a month, eternity, time had lost all meaning in the blackness of that space but one thought had always remained with him during that sentence, one thought he had coiled around his heart – revenge; a *vindicta* against the men who had robbed him of his rightful fate. Scipio’s dark memories were interrupted and he started slightly as Fabiola’s naked body, still warm from the bed, pressed against his back, warming the skin that had cooled in the pre-dawn air. Her arms enfolded around him and he raised his hands and encased hers in his across his chest. He knew she never slept either after his nightmares and whereas most nights he preferred his own company at this time, on this night, the night before he would take his first step on his road to vengeance, he accepted her presence without hesitation. He turned around





and looked into her face, her delicate features made more beautiful by the half-light. He gazed deeply into her eyes, seeing the intelligence there, but also the cold ruthlessness that she hid from all except her husband. A smile crept onto her face and he nodded slightly, his anticipation rising at the thought of the hours ahead and the plan made possible by his wife's incredible instincts.

'Soon . . .' she whispered.

He nodded again. The word had become a mantra for him, a talisman for the time when the men who had crossed him would pay for their crime.

'Soon . . .' he replied, taking his wife by the hand and leading her back through the rippling folds of the silk curtains.

The cool blue-green water of Brolium harbour removed every thought from Atticus's mind as he swam deeper beneath the hull of the *Aquila*, her recently caulked keel illuminated by the distorted light of the mid-morning sun refracting through the gentle swell of the waves above. The pressure in his lungs deepened as he hung suspended beneath the water, his brief exhalation of air to achieve neutral buoyancy prompting his body to protest at the rationing of its sustenance. Atticus ignored the slight burning sensation in his chest, his intimate knowledge of his body's limits, tested many times, allowing him to clear his mind and take in the sweep of his galley's hull. They had hit the Carthaginian ship hard and three of the strake timbers of the bow port quarter were deeply scored where the galleys had connected. With an experienced eye Atticus surveyed the damage, searching for telltale air bubbles that would foretell a weakness but the hull was sound. A reflexive reminder to breathe interrupted Atticus's thoughts and he thumped the hull twice with his fist before striking out for the surface.





Atticus broke the water's skin just shy of the forward anchor line and he reached out for the tether, breathing the morning air deeply, the two minutes underwater refreshing him after a fitful night's sleep. He scanned the seventeen galleys clustered around the *Aquila* at the eastern end of the busy harbour, their separation from the hustle and flow of the port's normal activities a self-imposed exile to lessen the shame of their defeat.

The fleet had arrived in Brolium as dawn was breaking, their unexpected appearance drawing curious crowds to the dockside where the galleys quickly disembarked the soldiers of the Ninth before retiring to take station in deeper waters, the legionaries marching in loose formation to their encampment beyond the town. Varro, his guard, and the four senators had also disembarked, the tribune making directly for the port commander's residence straddling the hill above the town. Atticus remembered tracking Varro's departure from his ship intently, expecting the tribune to approach and challenge him on his insubordination but Varro had walked directly from the hatchway to the gangplank, and thence to the dock, never once looking back.

A rogue cloud eclipsed the sun, its passing accompanied by a light on-shore breeze that animated the wave tops and cooled Atticus's shoulders above the waterline, prompting him to strike out once more for the rope ladder hanging from the main deck. He clambered up the steps and crossed the main deck, shrugging on the tunic he had left on the side rail as he went. Septimus was on the aft-deck and Atticus nodded a welcome to him as he approached the centurion.

'Drill?' Atticus asked, noticing the weighted wooden training sword held loosely by Septimus's side.

'Definitely,' Septimus replied, his eyes ranging over the drawn ranks of the marines on the main deck, 'anything to stop their minds dwelling on the last twenty-four hours!'





Atticus nodded, smiling inwardly. It was the type of order he had come to expect from Septimus; a return to routine at all costs.

‘No sign of the Tribune returning?’ Atticus asked, looking beyond Septimus to the empty waters between the *Aquila* and the docks two hundred yards away.

‘Not yet,’ Septimus replied, conscious of his friend’s unease over the inevitable confrontation that was yet to occur.

Atticus seemed not to hear the reply and so Septimus did not pursue the subject, aware of the situation from Atticus’s earlier remarks. He slapped his friend on the shoulder as he passed him to leave the aft-deck, raising his sword and testing its weight as he went, his concentration switching to his marines. Septimus checked his pace slightly as he noticed the gaping holes in their ranks, gaps left by the dead and injured and he mindfully shrugged off his grief, determined as always that his men would know him only as a disciplined commander.

Scipio slowly surfaced from beneath the crystal-clear water, his right hand wiping away the vestiges of water running down his face as he lay back once more in the lukewarm bath, his breathing deep and controlled. The circular bath was positioned in the very centre of the square *tepidarium* chamber, affording Scipio a view of the three doors of the room. Two of these led to the first and third chambers of the bath house annexed to his home, the third, the one that now held his attention, led to the slave quarters. He glanced at the third door surreptitiously, his ears tuned in the tranquillity of the tiled room to any telltale sound that would announce the arrival of the bath attendant.

The door opened and a middle aged man entered. He was stooped at the waist, as if bowed over by an invisible weight



and his head followed the contour of his back, his face down-cast in the ubiquitous manner of a slave. Scipio was careful not to reveal his interest in the man's arrival, conscious that any overt attention would be out of character and he suppressed the malicious smile that threatened his face as he recognised the slave. His name was Amaury, his pale skin marking him as a native of some foreign tribe beyond the great mountain range north of the Republic's borders. Slaves came and went in Scipio's household, often without stirring his attention, his indifference making them invisible. But Amaury, and one other, a stable lad named Tiago, were unique among the slaves of Scipio's household, a point discovered nearly three months ago by his wife Fabiola.

The door from the first chamber opened suddenly and Fabiola walked in amidst a cloud of steam from the scalding bath of the *caldarium* chamber. Scipio unconsciously marvelled at her poise and grace, her elegant stride acutely accentuated by the fact that she was completely naked, her innate confidence intensely alluring. She acknowledged her husband with a wry smile and slipped into the consuming waters in one fluid movement, her eyes never straying to the bath attendant who was considered nonexistent. Fabiola began to talk to her husband in light tones, her conversation ethereal, skipping from one trivial topic to another. Scipio simply nodded in reply, smiling briefly when Fabiola's words warranted the expression, his attention focused on the rehearsed question to come.

'Have you made a decision on your future in the Senate?' Fabiola asked, her tone never changing.

Scipio straightened imperceptibly, his thoughts touching briefly on how effortlessly Fabiola had introduced the topic into their conversation. He paused as if in contemplation before answering.



‘I have,’ he replied, his gaze never leaving his wife, his other senses intently focused on the slave in their midst. ‘I will pursue the censorship.’

Fabiola nodded, feigning unspoken approval. ‘So you believe you can gain the support of the *censores*?’ she asked, referring to the two magistrates entrusted with bestowing the censorship.

‘I am confident I can,’ Scipio replied. ‘I have been a consul, I am eligible for the position and with Duilius focused on the senior consulship, I will gain the *censores* implicit approval prior to the election, long before Duilius is even aware of my intention.’

Fabiola’s face hardened at the mention of Duilius’s name, an expression she did not have to fake.

‘It is unthinkable that that shop steward, that farmer, will rise to the highest rank in the Senate,’ she spat, her words not part of their carefully rehearsed conversation, her hatred for the man who had outmanoeuvred her husband temporarily overwhelming her normal self-control. She instantly regretted the slip and continued as if her invective had never been spoken.

‘His power will surpass yours in the Senate,’ she said. ‘You will be at his mercy.’

‘In all areas save one,’ Scipio replied, his face also betraying the hatred he could not suppress, ‘and using that all important, untouchable power the censor holds, I will make Duilius pay.’

Fabiola smiled maliciously at her husband’s words and for a heartbeat Scipio forgot the charade they were playing, his thoughts focused instead on the sudden overwhelming attraction he felt for his wife, captivated by the malevolent beauty of her.

‘Leave us,’ he commanded brusquely over his shoulder to





Amaury. The slave withdrew instantly. Scipio watched him leave, his triumphant expression finally giving voice to his emotions. He turned once more to his wife, noting immediately her expression, one that acutely mirrored his own. He moved slowly around the bath to her side, his eyes locked on beauty, his excitement and arousal combining to create an intoxicating potion that chased every thought from his mind.

Amaury quietly closed the oak door to the *tepidarium* chamber, his shaking hand the only outward sign of his inward elation, his continually downcast face as always showing only mute servility. He paused in the corridor for a heartbeat, glancing left and right, making certain he was alone before dropping the towels in his hand to the floor, his feet already taking him unerringly to the stables at the rear of the house. A rare smile formed at the edges of his mouth as he walked, the thought of his master's gratitude causing him to unconsciously quicken his pace as his senses picked up the pungent smell of the stables and the rhythmic sound of the blacksmith's forge. He turned the corner at the end of the corridor and pushed open the reinforced door to the courtyard beyond, the white sunlight of late summer spilling past him to briefly mark his exit from the confines of the house. Again he glanced furtively left and right, conscious of his anomalous presence in the courtyard. He spotted Tiago grooming a bay foal and made directly for him, his mind wilfully forming the news he had just heard into the brief report that the stable lad would deliver before the day's end.

Varro felt a flush of shame build again in his cheeks as his eyes swept back and forward between the faces of the four other men in the room on the ground floor of the port commander's residence. They were ignoring him completely,



talking amongst themselves as if he had silently departed after he had finished relaying the events of the past twenty-four hours. Twice he had interjected with a comment, his carefully prepared words dying mid-sentence as his voice was lost in the agitated debate, his opinion regarded as beneath consequence. Varro shifted once more on his feet, the deep fatigue of his body concentrated in the tormented muscles of his legs. He noticed the senior tribune of the Second Legion glance briefly in his direction and he straightened his back in anticipation, fighting the impulse to quail under the tribune's undisguised look of scorn, his shame rising unbidden again to manifest itself on his face.

Varro retreated inward as the conversation raged about him, his mind reaching back to the surety of the days and weeks before the disaster that was befalling his ambitions. He was so certain, so convinced, as his father had been, that the capture of Thermae was a mere formality, a stepping stone that would open every door in the corridors of power in Rome. The events of yesterday had reversed those aspirations. He replayed the battle in his thoughts, his mind's eye flashing images before him, his latent anger building slowly as he watched the sequence of events that had forged his fate, his pride baying for retribution as he remembered the insubordination of the Greek captain. The strike across his face was unforgivable, that blow the senators travelling with him had later claimed not to have witnessed, their confederacy with a lesser man adding grievous insult to his injury, their contemptuous looks beginning a pattern that Varro had seen mirrored in the senior tribune's face.

When the *Aquila* had pulled alongside the docks at Brolium, Varro had disembarked without looking back at the aft-deck, not sure that he could control his temper should he see the captain watching him. With the senators firmly on the captain's

side Varro had realised that any accusation he levelled, without eye witness support, would likely be seen by others as a desperate attempt to apportion blame on a man who had proved himself at Mylae. It was therefore a simple matter of honour between two men and Varro's accusation would have to be followed by a challenge, a challenge the young tribune knew he could not win against a man ten years his senior and ten times his better in fighting skills. Varro had decided in the darkness of his cabin as the *Aquila* fled Thermae, that there would be no spoken accusation, no open challenge. There would be only revenge.

As Varro's gaze refocused on the present he noticed all eyes in the room were upon him and he realised they were waiting for him to answer a question he had not heard.

'I . . .' he hesitated, his expression exposing his lapse in concentration; 'I didn't . . .'

'The camp prefect asked you a question, Varro,' the senior tribune of the Ninth barked, indicating the eldest man in the room. 'When will you be ready to sail?'

'To sail?' Varro asked uncertainly, furious at himself for having drifted off from the conversation.

'For Rome man, for Rome!' the senior tribune said impatiently.

Varro's mind raced as he considered the question, realising that he had no idea how long it took to ready a galley for sea.

'We'll need to restock . . .' he began, trying to hide his lack of knowledge.

'I'll see that all necessary stores are made available from the barrack's stores,' the port commander of Brolium interjected; 'we can have the *Aquila* fully stocked before the tide turns, two hours at most.'

Varro nodded his assent but the port commander didn't seem to notice, looking instead to the senior tribune for approval.



‘Make it so,’ the senior tribune commanded, usurping Varro’s position.

‘We’re agreed then,’ the officer of the Ninth continued, turning his attention to his opposite number in the Second. ‘Tacitus, you will take two thousand of the Second west on a forced march to intercept the retreating soldiers of the Ninth. I will take the remainder of the fleet on a parallel course along the coast.’

‘But the fleet is . . .’ Varro said, cutting himself short, instantly regretting his remark.

‘Is what, Varro? Yours?’ the tribune replied with a sneer. ‘Your *fleet* was destroyed at Thermae. Now your only task is to sail to Rome and inform the Senate of your defeat!’

The tribune turned contemptuously from the younger man and nodded his dismissal to the prefect and port commander before saluting his equal from the Second. His gesture was returned and then all four men left the room without another word, each one passing Varro at arm’s length, careful not to touch the disgraced officer for fear of tainting their own fortune. Varro stood rooted to the spot as the footfalls of the others faded along the corridor.

Hamilcar let his shield fall to the sand as the approaching skiff reached the line of breaking waves off the beach at Thermae. The two oarsmen rowed with skill, riding each wave as the current of the crest caught them, using the blades of their oars to balance the hull in the crashing surf. Hamilcar walked forward into the water as one of the oarsmen jumped nimbly from the boat, holding the bowsprit to steady the craft and allow their commander to board. Hamilcar jumped in and sat in the bow as the boat was swung around to once more face the anchored fleet in the mid-channel of the harbour, both oarsmen rapidly re-taking their positions,





bending their backs into the task of sculling out through the breakers.

Hamilcar stared impassively past the two rowers to the beach he had just left and the exhausted soldiers who stood motionless along the line of seaweed that marked the furthest advance of the tide. They had fought well over the past twenty-four hours, harrying the Romans relentlessly as they retreated east along the shore. At first Hamilcar and his men could only pick off stragglers and the injured, surprised as they were by the sudden breakout of the Romans, a breakout that had postponed Hamilcar's reunion with the fleet until now. The enemy infantry's escape had been uneven and the narrow confines of the coastline had forced the Romans into an extended line of advance, a weak formation that Hamilcar's commanders had mercilessly exploited, advancing rapidly on the enemy flanks to ambush every rearguard the Romans formed. Hamilcar had personally led many of the charges, his anger at the frustration of his trap causing him to recklessly take the front in an effort to assuage his fury. His orders had been disobeyed; his fleet cut to an ineffective fraction of its original size by an unknown person. Exposing the traitor had become the dominant thought in Hamilcar's mind and with the pattern of attack established, he had delegated the pursuit of the Romans to one of his commanders, freeing him to return to Thermae to find his betrayer.

The skiff pulled neatly alongside the flagship, a quinquereme named the *Alissar*. Hamilcar leapt onto the stepladder and climbed up to the main deck, ignoring the crew assembled in his honour, his gaze instead seeking out the man he had placed in command of the fleet. Himilco stood front and centre, the captain's salute formal and exact. He stepped forward towards Hamilcar, extending his hand as he did.





‘Welcome aboard, Commander,’ he said, a broad smile forming across his narrow face. ‘Congratulations on a great victory!’

The crew cheered on cue, their voices raised in praise of their commander but Hamilcar’s stern expression never changed and as he neared the captain he noticed a shade of doubt flash across Himilco’s eyes.

‘Follow me,’ Hamilcar said brusquely, cutting off the captain before he could utter another word.

Himilco hesitated for a second, his mind racing to comprehend Hamilcar’s attitude, before he hurried after his commander.

Hamilcar pushed open the door of the main cabin under the aft-deck and walked into the middle of the room. It was sparsely furnished, as befitting a battleship, with a map-strewn table in the centre and a cot on the starboard side. A large personal chest stood on the opposite side of the cabin. Hamilcar closed his eyes and dropped his head until his chin rested on his chest, breathing deeply in an effort to control the urge to run the captain through with the blood-stained sword at his side, to wipe the asinine smile off his face. ‘Congratulations,’ the fool had said and Hamilcar’s hand moved instinctively to the hilt of his sword. He heard Himilco’s footfalls behind him and the heavy sound of the door closing. They were alone.

With a speed that defied the eye Hamilcar spun around, drawing his sword in a single swipe as he did, the blade clearing the scabbard with inches to spare, its once smooth edge nicked and scored from the previous day’s combat. Himilco’s reaction was measured only in his face, his every defence too slow to respond to the unexpected attack as Hamilcar covered the gap between them before Himilco’s eyes could blink in surprise. The blade stopped an inch from the captain’s throat; its vibrating point the only outward sign of the immense self-control Hamilcar had exercised in staying its thrust.





‘Where is the rest of the fleet?!’ he shouted, his anger forcing the point of the blade against the skin of Himilco’s throat, drawing blood from the fallow skin.

‘My lord?’ Himilco asked, his confusion entangled with fear.

‘The fleet,’ Hamilcar roared. ‘The one hundred galleys I assembled in Panormus with orders to sail to Thermae. I saw only forty here yesterday. Where are the rest?’

‘Off the coast of Malaka in Iberia,’ Himilco stammered, his expression one of bewilderment, his hands now raised reflexively in a futile gesture.

‘By whose orders?’ Hamilcar barked, readying himself to run Himilco through in anticipation of his answer.

Again confusion broke through the captain’s expression of fear. ‘By your orders,’ he replied, a plea in his voice, ‘Councillor Hanno issued them on your behalf three days after you left Panormus.’

Now it was Hamilcar’s face that showed shock and the tension in his sword arm lessened without conscious thought, the point of the blade moving down to rest against the captain’s chest.

‘Hanno?’ he said, almost to himself.

‘Yes, my Lord,’ Himilco replied, relief rushing through him as the answer the commander had sought was finally found.

‘He told you it was my order?’

‘Yes, my Lord,’ Himilco repeated.

Hamilcar stepped back and sheathed his sword, his mind now ignoring the captain, its focus instead on the discovery of the man who had ruined his trap and rendered it incomplete.

‘Assemble a squad and set sail for Panormus immediately,’ Hamilcar said.

Himilco sensed his commander’s intentions and spoke with a renewed sense of safety, conscious that Hamilcar’s sword was no longer at his throat.



‘The councillor sailed for Carthage the day we left Panormus,’ he ventured.

‘Then we follow,’ Hamilcar replied after a second’s thought. ‘All speed to Carthage.’

Himilco saluted and left the cabin, his steps almost breaking into a run in an effort to put distance between himself and his commander’s sword.

Hamilcar watched him go, replaying the captain’s words in his mind as he did. In by-passing Panormus he would miss a prearranged meeting with one of his senior officers, Belus, a man to whom Hamilcar had already entrusted a vital component of a greater scheme and for a moment he worried that Hanno might have also obstructed those orders. He immediately dismissed his concern, confident in Belus’s loyalty and he turned his full attention to Hanno once more. The councillor’s actions were inexplicable and his subterfuge, his use of Hamilcar’s authority, was an act of treachery that any man who was ranked less than Hanno would pay for with his life. The depth of Hamilcar’s thoughts were undisturbed even as the dull thud of the drum beat began, its sound reverberating through the timbers of the *Alissar* as the galley got underway, her crew bringing her about on a course that would take her to the city of Carthage.

Gaius Duilius sat silently in the centre of the semi-circular forum of the *Curia Hostilia*, the senate house of Rome, his eyes ranging over the faces of the other senators of the house, their attention focused on the potent, almost hypnotic words of the speaker, Lucius Manlius Vulso Longus. Outside, the afternoon sun was suspended in the western sky; the shadows and shapes it created across the marble floor of the inner chamber transfixed in the still air.

Duilius looked upon friend and foe alike, on the undecided



and the resolute in each group, his mind calculating odds and testing scenarios. As he watched, many of the senators nodded with a practiced look of sagacity at the words Longus was speaking and Duilius smiled inwardly, awaiting the applause he knew would follow, approbation for the keynote of the speech that he had written for Longus. The senators applauded on cue and once again Duilius used the opportunity to search beyond the outward displays of approval and agreement on the senators' faces to try to divine their true intentions.

The elections were less than three days away and although Duilius was confident of victory, he was acutely aware of the limits to his knowledge, conscious that although his accession to the senior consulship was assured, the size of his majority in the secret ballot was yet unknown as were the true strength and numbers of his adversaries. As the victor of Mylae, Duilius was still exploiting the residual gratitude of the people of Rome and the Senate and he had used his influence to engineer Longus's nomination to the junior consulship, his speech a carefully crafted manifesto that Duilius hoped would win favour with the undeclared majority of the house.

As Duilius's gaze reached the far end of the forum, he swept his gaze around again, this time in search of Longus's main rivals. They were scattered sporadically amongst the 300 strong senate, each one an ear of wheat amidst the chaff, some rising higher than the others, but all members of the ancient conservative Patrician class against whom Duilius had battled during his entire career in the Senate. That contest had reached its zenith the previous year when Duilius had been junior consul to Gnaeus Cornelius Scipio, the patriarch of their pompous faction. The open rivalry had brought to the surface the supporters of each man, and by extension each philosophy, conservative verses progressive, and the house had divided along those lines with the centre occupied by a fickle majority



whose votes were bought and extorted by the opposing forces. Now however, with Scipio discredited and in absentia, his supporters had dispersed and were once more hidden amongst the confusion of the malleable centre, their concealment reducing Duilius's ability to judge the outcome of each vote.

As Longus finished his speech, many in the house stood to applaud the young senator and he smiled boldly at his supporters. Duilius stood also as an overt sign of his endorsement, moving his clapping hands from left to right as if to display this approval to the entire house. He caught the young senator's gaze for a brief instant and Longus nodded his thanks, his fawning devotion evident to even the most obtuse observer and Duilius looked away quickly, hoping to wipe the sycophantic smile from Longus's face, the expression unwise given that the majority of senators believed in the tradition that each consul, both junior and senior, should be their own man, each one, at least overtly, acting as a check against the power of the other.

Longus stepped down from the podium and made his way to his seat as a rival took to the centre of the floor to make his own case for election. Duilius turned in his seat, away from the speaker but also from Longus, conscious that the young senator was probably staring across at him, hoping once again to catch his eye. The thought made Duilius uncharacteristically re-examine his decision to promote Longus as a candidate for the junior consulship. With his own victory assured, Duilius's endorsement carried significant weight and he had chosen carefully, conscious that his decision would be examined minutely by every senator. Longus had many flaws as a man, his inexperience exacerbating many of them but Duilius was sure of one inimitable quality that Longus possessed, and that was loyalty. In the maelstrom of shifting alliances and duplicitous allegiances that defined the Senate, Duilius would always be

sure of Longus's support. Duilius's uncertainties dissipated as he reaffirmed his decision and he let his mind drift to other topics, ignoring the rambling polemic from the speaker at the podium. His gaze extended to the colonnaded entrance to the chamber and lengthening shadows of the day, consciously willing the sun to speed its progress to a point below the horizon. As his eyes moved over the spaces between each column he spotted the familiar figure of Lutatius, his private secretary, and the sight arrested his attention and chased every thought from his mind. Lutatius was unmoved, his gaze locked on his master and although he did not gesture, his mere presence spoke of an urgency that Duilius could not ignore. The consul stood up and walked directly to the exit, his abrupt movement causing the speaker to pause in indignation at the unprincipled insult inherent in Duilius's departure and a muttered undertone of disapproval swept through the house. Duilius was oblivious however, his attention locked on Lutatius. Sundown, the traditional close of business in the Senate, was less than an hour away, Duilius thought. What was so urgent that Lutatius could not wait for his return home?

Lutatius stepped back around the column into the full glare of the afternoon sun as Duilius approached, screening himself from the prying eyes of any in the chamber. Duilius rounded the column, shielding his eyes as they adjusted to the sunlight reflecting off the marble columns and flagstones, the residual heat of the day in marked contrast to the cool atmosphere of the Senate chamber. Lutatius looked furtively over his shoulder as his master stood before him, checking again to see if anyone was within earshot, conscious as always of how easy it was to betray oneself through carelessness.

'What news?' Duilius asked his private secretary, a man who also tightly controlled the consul's extensive web of spies across the city.

‘Scipio,’ Lutatius replied simply.

‘He has revealed his plans?’ Duilius ventured, his excitement mounting.

‘Yes,’ Lutatius nodded. ‘Tiago brought news from Amaury this very hour.’

‘And?’

‘The censorship, my lord, Scipio plans to attain the censorship.’

Duilius was instantly and simultaneously flooded with conflicting emotions. Relief and triumph at having finally learned of Scipio’s plans and dread at the havoc Scipio could wreak should he succeed. The two censors were elected each year from the ranks of the former consuls serving in the Senate. By tradition, one of the positions was guaranteed to a retiring senator as a sinecure recognising a lifetime’s service to the state, while the other was sought through application by the more ambitious former consuls. Duilius had already taken steps to ensure an ally, Anicius Paulinus, who would be the forerunner for the second position but now, with Scipio’s intentions exposed, Paulinus’s appointment was far from secure.

Without another word, Duilius swept past his secretary and down the steps of the Curia, Lutatius falling in behind at a respectable distance, the business of the Senate proceeding unabated within the chamber, unaware that the most powerful man in Rome would not be returning that day.

‘Skiff approaching!’

Atticus walked quickly to the side-rail to see the small boat approaching the *Aquila* from the distant quay. He instantly recognised Varro sitting in the fore of the boat, his tribune’s helmet distinctive even at a distance of a hundred yards. He was alone with his guard, the senators evidently remaining in

Brolium, and Atticus found himself staring, his mind trying to fathom the thoughts of a man he did not know in any sense. Varro had been born into a life of privilege and wealth where power and command was a birthright. Atticus was born a fisherman's son in a squalid hovel in the backstreets of Locri and had clawed his way to the top of his world, a pinnacle that was insignificant to a Roman magistrate's son. Atticus tried to reverse their positions in his mind in a complex attempt to find a way for Varro to save face without Atticus losing, at best, his commission and at worst, his life.

'Forget it,' Septimus said beside Atticus and the captain spun around with a puzzled expression on his face.

'Forget what?' he asked.

'I know you too well, Atticus,' Septimus replied, standing shoulder-to-shoulder with his friend. 'You're trying to think of a way out of your problem with that young idiot Varro.'

'And?' Atticus asked.

'And I'm saying forget it. I came across his type many times in the Ninth. One hand on his dagger and the other in daddy's back pocket; every one of them an ambitious viper with an ego fit for the Senate. Whatever fate he's decided for you he'll be damned if he lets anyone change his course, especially you.'

Atticus nodded, chasing any thoughts he had of explanation and reconciliation from his mind. He walked away from Septimus and began pacing along the rail.

Before Mylae the *Aquila* had been Atticus's to command with Septimus unobtrusively responsible for the marines, their ranks equal and separate, with no higher power to answer to beyond their standing orders to keep the shipping lanes of the Republic clear of pirates. It was a task that would often keep them at sea for months, away from the rigid command structures that entangled them every time they entered port, and Atticus had always relished the independence. That freedom

had been lost at Mylae however, when the *Aquila* had been absorbed into the *Classis Romanus*, a lone wolf suddenly becoming part of a larger pack, no longer hunting prey using its singular skill but as part of a group, the hunt becoming a complex power play of command and ambition, where opportunities drew men like Varro to the fray.

Atticus stopped pacing as the skiff came alongside, watching the tribune disembark with the agile ability of youth. As he waited, Atticus felt anger rise slowly within him for the vicissitudes of fate that had placed his life at the whim of a man like Varro. At Mylae, Duilius had stood on the aft-deck of the *Aquila* as commander of the greatest fleet Rome had ever put to sea and yet he had treated Atticus as an equal, their shared fight uniting them against the Carthaginians, the consul understanding that in battle, men were equal before Pluto, the lord of the underworld. Varro, on the other hand, treated those of lesser rank with near contempt and negligible respect, irrespective of their past service to the Republic. For a brief second Atticus recalled the challenges of his hard fought career and his concern for his fate fled his mind. He had fought greater foes than the young tribune who now approached him across the main deck and he'd be damned if he was going to yield without a fight, even if redemption was a forlorn hope. Atticus straightened his back and stood to attention as the tribune covered the remaining steps between them on the aft-deck and he saluted smartly.

'Make preparations for Rome, Captain,' Varro said brusquely.

Atticus hesitated for a heartbeat, waiting for the tribune's next words, but none were forthcoming. 'Yes, Tribune,' he replied, repeating his salute.

Varro spun on his heel and walked purposefully away to the hatchway that led to the main cabin below. Atticus watched him go, baffled by the brevity of the exchange. The tribune's



expression had been near inscrutable, cold and determined, but Atticus had noticed something in Varro's eyes, something that alerted his instincts, a mere flicker of hostility that spoke of a deeper emotion, an unspoken antagonism that belied the calm exterior the tribune had so deceitfully presented. Atticus had fought many enemies in his life and he knew the look well, knew its portent as surely as if the tribune had challenged him openly on the aft-deck.

