

## Africanus

Hannibal Barca sat in a tent with his captains, his attention shifting between bickering officers, sheets of papyrus, maps and reports piled high upon the central table, and the slow burn of an oil lamp offering only a hazy glow to the night's proceedings.

"My warriors are at the center?" one of Hannibal's captains, a Spaniard, raised his voice and jabbed accusingly at the huge map of the coming battle laid out on the war table. "I haven't enough room to maneuver. When the Romans charge, my men will be the first slaughtered in the fighting-"

The Gaelic officer, Hannibal remembered his name as Burdoc, said in a calm, firm voice, "Fear not Axres, for ye'll have Gaelic steel at your back, and Numidian horsemen at your side."

Hannibal knew as well as his officers this was no reassurance. Spanish fidelity was a contradiction in terms, and a cruel trick for any would-be conqueror of their homeland. Hannibal and his father Hamilcar spent years forming alliances with fickle clans and tribes, only to watch it all melt away before Rome's banner.

Another officer, this time Pelaeus the Macedonian, started talking. He wanted his own troops to serve at the front, feeling it was the duty of every Greek, even a mercenary such as himself, to seek out the thickest fighting.

"Leave the center to my men; we'll drive those dogs before us and cut the still-beating hearts from their chests!"

Hannibal barely listened. His mind drifted to the map on the large, oaken table before him.

How small it seemed. Hannibal had marched across the Mediterranean world like a reborn

Alexander, from the African coast to the Spanish plains, across the Alps and through the very heartland of Italy. Yet for all his travels, for all his successes, he now fought on the plains of Africa, not a week's march to the city of Carthage, where he began.

He let out a long sigh, "Pelaeus, you sound like a Roman."

"A Roman?" Palaeus' bushy brows bunched up, a comical contrast to his hairless head. "Every Roman is raised hearing Homer's tales. All they care for is the thrill of battle and the sight of blood on their swords."

Palaeus bowed his head. "Forgive me General. My blood occasionally runs hot."

"It is forgotten," Hannibal said. "You're Macedonians are needed on the inner flanks." Fiercer spear-men than the Greeks there were not, and Hannibal knew the coming battle would be won or lost by the Roman cavalry. For the first time in his life Hannibal found himself against a Roman advantage in cavalry. Spears would be needed to keep them checked.

Hannibal then turned to face the Spaniard Axres, "As for you, there is less to worry about than you believe. I am ordering all our war elephants ahead of our lines. With luck, the Roman lines will be in disarray when we clash."

Though the Spaniard seemed well pleased with this reassurance, the other officers exchanged glances.

"Dismissed," Hannibal waved one hand, "We've all a need for rest, and I think we've used up enough lamp oil for several nights."

The officers made their way out of the tent, leaving only Hannibal and Burdoc. The Gael brushed his long, red beard agitatedly and watched his commander.

"Is there something else?" Hannibal asked.

"General..." Burdoc hesitated, and then said, "I worry about the use of elephants in the upcoming battle."

Hannibal watched his officer with a lone eye, the other lost to a campaign illness, and said, "Elephants have been a staple of the Carthaginian army since-"

"I know General, I know," said Burdoc quickly, "But these ones are too wild. They were only taken from the bush a few moons ago. Even with trained elephants there's no guarantee they won't crash back into our own lines."

"You worry too much, old friend. The Romans will be panicked and crushed by the elephants," Hannibal said with a reassuring smile, still seated at the table, "The Romans know only one strategy: to push forward until there is nothing standing. Such tactics cannot win against the might of charging war elephants."

Burdoc shook his head slowly. "General, I have been speaking with some of the men who served with your brothers while you marched on Rome. They speak of the Roman general before us, this Publius Scipio."

"And?" Hannibal asked, "What of it? What do they say?"

"They say he doesn't fight like a Roman," said Burdoc, "They say that every time they met him in Hispania he fought like a Roman Hannibal."

Hannibal crossed his arms. "Do you think I cannot win?"

Burdoc gazed upon his commander for a long moment. "General, I have been by your side since Trebia. I was there and at Lake Trasimene when you defeated the Romans. I was there at Cannae when you destroyed them. I have been away from my home for sixteen years. My sons must now have sons of their own, and my name forgotten by all save my heirs and the shamans."

He bowed very low then, and said, "I cannot doubt you, else why serve at all?" Burdoc slowly turned around and left the tent.

Hannibal, all alone, sighed once more. Burdoc was always cautious. It was an odd trait for a Gaulish warrior. Hannibal could remember him with a shorter beard and darker hair, ages ago on some forgotten mountain in the Alps. Time had slowly transformed the youthful warrior into an old man.

It had done so for Hannibal as well, mottling his once solid brown curls with gray hair. His beard had also suffered this wintering. In forty years, Hannibal knew he had the reputation in his youth of possessing a runner's form, lanky and lean. Age had done away with that. Now halfway between his fortieth and fiftieth summer, Hannibal's form was bulkier, more laden with muscle and strength than grace.

But for all his slowing down, Hannibal's mind remained as sharp as always, as full of cunning and guile as a fox.

Slowly rising to his feet, Hannibal suddenly gripped his legs with his hands. A slow, aching pain throbbed softly in his knees. He slowly made his way to his bed, the pain receding slowly. The gods

had seen fit to bestow the Carthaginian with aching bones in his old age. He once heard Burdoc jest that it was to keep Hannibal from flanking them.

He sat down heavily on his cot. He would have been proud to sleep in a cot on the floor, but his knees and back demanded a raised one. Hannibal, it would seem could only be defeated by himself.

He removed his sandals and tunic, and then lay back to rest. The lamplight was dim enough not to wake him, and the noises of the camp had settled down for the night. Tomorrow, Hannibal knew, the soldiers would revel. But if the Romans attacked tonight, before the parley, they would need to be ready. Once the parley was complete, the Romans would abide by their general's will, be it to leave Africa or burn it.

Hannibal let his thoughts wander. His brothers, Mago and Hadsrubal had fought these Romans before, so Burdoc said. This Publius Cornelius Scipio. Hannibal remembered hearing of Scipio's father and uncle, the Scipio brothers from news sent by Mago. They tried to take Hispania from his family, only managing to die by Spanish and Carthaginian steel.

Still, such thoughts were for the morning. For now, as sleep threatened, Hannibal wished to think of happier times, before the war with Rome, back before so many lives weighed on his decisions. He summoned the image of his brothers as they appeared when they were boys just learning to ride horse with their father, the great Hamilcar.

As he slipped off into slumber, Hannibal's last conscious thoughts were of his brothers as he saw them last, just before he crossed into the Alps. He would never admit it, but the faces were that of

Burdoc and Palaeus. He couldn't remember what Mago or Hadsrubal looked like.

Hannibal stood on the edge of a high cliff. All around him there was the chaos of a world too great and terrible for such a small child to endure. The sky was torn asunder by thunder and lightning. Wild winds sent by the gods sought to steal the air from his lungs. Through the black clouds Hannibal could see the eyes of the heavens, gazing upon him.

The sea, nearly a hundred leagues down the side of the impossibly high precipice thrashed and boiled with the inchoate fury of Poseidon at the maiming of his son by Odysseus' hands. He could see the phantoms of wild stallions dancing upon the surf, clawing at the cliff-side as if they wished to pounce upon the boy Hannibal.

He fell back from the ledge, towards the desert behind him. There another sea, endless ranks and row upon row of spears and warriors stood at attention. Hannibal could not tell if they were Carthaginian or Roman, only that they were armed and armored in the finest bronze armor, as if pulled straight from the Homeric tales of that bygone era.

**In** the midst of them stood a man, taller than any other. He was possessed of large, strong hands, hand that Hannibal remembered showing him the proper drawing of a bowstring, and how to use his first horse's reins.

The towering, barrel-chested man, with his mighty beard and glittering eyes approached Hannibal.

"Father!" young Hannibal cried, "Father, why won't you take me with you?"

Hamilcar watched his son with a steady, unflinching gaze. "I am to Hispania. I cannot take one of my sons to that barbarous nation before he can fight alongside me in battle."

"I can ride a horse, Father. You showed me. You showed me to use a bow, and the sword." Hannibal wanted, more than anything to go with his father, to sail to distant lands and see the wonders of the world outside of Carthage. He wanted to see the world, to make of it what he willed, to stand beside Alexander the Great, Odysseus, Hector and Achilles, all the heroes he had read about.

But mostly, he wanted to be with his father, if only for the few moments in a dream.

"My son," Hamilcar said slowly, "Do you know what the people of our city say? What do they say of your father?"

Hannibal did not wish to answer. He knew what the people said. "They say it was because of you ...it was because of you that we lost the war. But I don't believe it," he added, "You did everything you could. It was because they cheated, or it was a trick, wasn't it father?"

Hamilcar looked away, towards the raging sea. "No. It was no trick. The Romans defeated us because they were clever, and because they fought harder. They are much like us."

He looked back at his son and cupped Hannibal's face in one, giant hand. "But you, my son, you are clever as well. You are the cleverest of your brothers. You are cleverer than me."

Hannibal's father placed his hand on the boy's shoulder and walked him back to the sea.

Looking out over the waves, Hamilcar continued. "Out there, beyond the seas labor an iron beast, a giant she-wolf. Its hunger is endless, as is its avarice. If it is not stopped, the Roman monster will cover all the world in its darkness."

Hamilcar knelt before his son and looked deep into Hannibal's eyes. The boy had never seen tears so close to break through his father's stern visage. An older Hannibal could see a man haunted by his past, by mistakes and lost chances gazing out through those eyes.

"My son, I will take you with me to Hispania if you swear unto me an oath."

The warriors arrayed behind them seemed to shift, and quickly one had stepped forth with a dagger in his hand. This the soldier passed to Hamilcar, who made a gash in his palm. He held the blade out for his son to take.

Hannibal reached out slowly, reluctantly. As he took the blade, the wind began to howl like never before, tossing aside the waves of warriors, tearing whole sections of rock from the cliffs and casting them to the thunderous seas.

His father spoke with all the finality and power of a temple priest. "Hannibal, do you swear that from this day hence, Rome shall be your enemy? Do you swear that you shall know no rest until Carthage is secured from their madness for all time? Do you swear to destroy their armies, to make them pay in blood for every transgression against us? Do you swear?"

Hannibal stared at his father, and then pulled the dagger's edge across his palm.

Hannibal stepped out of his camp, through a set of huge main gates. He appeared as whole and hearty as ever, the dreams of last night already forgotten. His sight was sharp, despite his missing eye, and he could easily discern the Roman camp. It lay only a few miles across an empty expanse of grassland, a farming village abandoned to the two armies as they approached.

The distance did not bother him. He could reconstruct the structure of a Roman camp by memory alone. Canvas upon wood upon stone, carried thousands of miles on soldiers' backs, assembled into a fort in a scant few hours, disassembled after breakfast and on the road well before mid-day. If the Romans had one, and only one, admirable trait, it was their obstinate refusal to do things easily when they could do it proper.

Exactly halfway between the two camps a large white tent had been constructed. The wind played gently with the twin banners that waved from atop the tent, one a Roman red and the other Carthaginian white. It was there, Hannibal knew, Publius Scipio waited to parley. One could always count on the Romans to follow the niceties of war when it served their purposes, or it stroked their ego to play the magnanimous victor.

Burdoc, Palaeus and Axres stood ready to walk with their commander, as well as a Greek translator. One couldn't expect a Roman to know more than his own, vulgar tongue after all.

"General," Burdoc said, "Are you ready?"

If I'm not, it wouldn't matter. Off we go.

As the party began to move, Hannibal felt that throbbing pain in his leg again. Biting his lip, he soldiered through it. Of course it would return now, he thought bitterly.

Hannibal glanced back at his encampment. It was almost a city in and of itself, so large and sprawling was the camp. Atop the tents there flew banners from every race of man who had ever stood against the Romans. That should have put some fear into them. Every people that had ever been wronged was now set to bear down on the Sons of Romulus, bearing a deeply personal, murderous vendetta.

Over in their own camp the Romans were probably even now slaughtering scores of beasts to win the favor of their distasteful, foreign gods, Hannibal did not doubt. They would find Hannibal's own gods laughed at such nonsense. African soil was no good for the gods of barbarians.

As Hannibal walked he took in the plains with his good eye, and felt a sudden stirring in his heart, like the breeze that tugged at his robe and tousled his graying-brown hair. He was called back to defend his homeland, called back from his fifteen year-long fight in Italy to prevent the Romans from sneaking around him and destroying Carthage. He had traveled the Mediterranean world, had lived almost all his life either in Hispania or Italy, but in the coastal farmlands of Africa, Hannibal finally felt at home. He could remember entering the city of Carthage only a week ago and feeling a deep, resounding nothingness. It was like visiting another conquered city, all gaunt-faced natives begging their overlord for mercy. Even the city Elders seemed exhausted by the war.

He didn't stay long. Only a week, long enough to convince the Elders to grant him any amount of soldiers they could muster, and then he was off inland to face his people's enemy. It was strange to

think that after thirty years, from his childhood on, he had never set foot in his homeland. And then he was leaving again, on that same errand his father had taken, to destroy the Romans.

Hannibal swept the whole valley with his eye. Here and there he could see troops placed, or horses charging. Try as he might, Hannibal could not see any tactical advantage here. The valley was too flat, the grass too low to conceal troops. He knew this valley well, but that meant nothing.

As a boy, Hannibal learned to ride a horse in this valley. His father gave him and his younger brothers lessons after returning from the first, disastrous war against Rome. These lessons didn't last long before the whole family uprooted itself and left for Hispania.

Hispanic's horses were better, of course, and Hannibal was allowed to follow his father to battle, to become a student of war there. He loved the new life he led, but it never felt like home.

Burdoc leaned in to whisper, "General? Are you alright?"

"What?" Hannibal snapped his attention to his officer.

"General, are you in pain?"

Hannibal realized he had been grimacing from the pain in his leg. He quickly tried to banish the throbbing from his mind and put on a calmer appearance for his soldiers.

"Just sore, Burdoc. I was stuck in a chair listening to you blather on all night." Burdoc smiled, hopefully reassured.

As the party continued toward the white tent, Hannibal's mind returned to the Roman general.

He had a strange, macabre interest in Scipio. The young Roman had been the architect of Roman victory in Hispania. In five years, Scipio had undone everything Hannibal and his father had worked towards. New Carthage laid in ash and ruin. The Spanish tribes now swore allegiance, fickle as it was, to Rome. Mago and Hadsrubal, Hannibal's brothers were dead. Dead and beyond his capacity to recall.

Hannibal wondered if Scipio felt avenged of his father and uncle's deaths. Or would it take more blood?

The party was nearing the tent when Palaeus groaned, "I don't like this. It's too quiet. What if it's a trap? What if they slit our throats?"

Burdoc set a hand on the Greek's shoulder. "Palaeus, you sound like a Roman. Relax."

Near the tent stood a cluster of Roman soldiers. As Hannibal reached the tent, his men set themselves opposite the Romans. There were no weapons, supposedly, but each side watched the other for signs of deception.

Hannibal watched his interpreter enter the tent. He took a deep breath and followed. Inside, the air was cool and calm, only the occasional flap of canvas reminded him of the wind outside. The whole floor seemed to be made of fine rugs, and around the walls cupboards like those found in a normal home held scroll after scroll. Doubtless they were there to showcase Roman ingenuity. In the center of the tent, a set of seats had been prepared.

In one sat Hannibal's foe. Scipio sat in a low-slung wood chair, his arms carefully folded in his lap. He wore a blue tunic, studded lightly with brass, and a red soldier's cape as a toga. His eyes never left Hannibal

Hannibal made his way to his own seat, managing to suppress a groan as he sat down. He was right to call this Scipio a boy. Golden tresses framed a face fit for a lad still too young to accompany his father on campaign, not a soldier.

To one side the interpreters nodded to one another, a professional courtesy. Scipio said something in Latin, which his interpreter quickly translated.

"Greetings most esteemed Hannibal. I am Publius Cornelius Scipio."

Of course, Hannibal already knew what the Roman said. He learned the language during his time in Italy, and now hoped to use it to his advantage. No secret messages could be passed without his knowing.

"Well met," Hannibal said in his native Carthaginian, "I am sure that we can find a way to peacefully resolve our differences."

After the interpreter relayed this, Scipio spoke again. His interpreter said, "May the gods look kindly on such hopes."

"Then," Hannibal said, "What terms do you wish to propose?"

Scipio leaned in and let a goblin grin pass over his features. He said, in perfect Greek, "Oh, dear Hannibal. We both know there were never terms. This meeting was just so we could talk."

Hannibal's eye snapped wide open. "You speak Greek?"

"As do you, I see. Why?" Scipio said, mock hurt on his face, "did you not expect this of some barbaric Roman?" He waved irritably at the interpreters, and they made their way out quickly.

"Why ..." Hannibal struggled for the words, "Why the charade?"

"To annoy my interpreter," Scipio laughed, leaning back in his chair, "The look on your face was a considerable bonus, however."

Hannibal scowled. He stood up swiftly and growled, "I don't have to take this from some whelp. If you did not ask me here for a parley, then what reason compelled this meeting?"

Scipio remained composed and seated. "Why, to meet you of course."

Hannibal heard him, but he already guessed at the real reason. How did such a young boy manage to get a rise out of him? Damn him.

Returning to his seat, Hannibal checked his anger. "Well, here I am. What shall we talk about?" Scipio shrugged, and then said, "Tell me, how's the family?"

"The what?"

"Your brothers," said Scipio, "I know Hardball is no more, but I was wondering about Mago. I haven't seen him since Spain."

Hannibal affected a calm tone. "Mago died of his injuries before he could return to Carthage."

"Ah, such is life, yes?"

Hannibal decided he didn't like this Roman very much. "Yes. I suppose it is."



"Well then," Scipio clapped his hands once, "shall we discuss the battle tomorrow?"  
"If you like."

Scipio steepled his fingers in his lap. "I would say a "North/South" battle. Our camps are already in position. Is morning alright?"

"Very well," Hannibal said, his hand rubbing one another, "I shall approach the Northwest, and you ..."

"The Northwest?" said Scipio.

"Is there a problem?"

"No, but then I think we should hold off until midday, at least."

Damn, Hannibal thought. With his army facing the Northwest, Hannibal's troops would have been looking away from the rising sun, and Scipio's towards it.

"A question, if I may?" Scipio asked.

"You may," said Hannibal glumly.

"How did this happen?" the Roman dragged one finger over his own eye.

Hannibal said, "It wasn't some great deed, if that's what you're hoping for. The gods sought to give your armies a fighting chance, and so took my eye while I was traversing your marshes."

Scipio nodded, "That sounds like our gods. 'Bastards', I've heard a few soldiers call them."

"You would say such things about your gods?"

"Oh, don't let the bowing, scraping, and sacrificing fool you," the Roman said, "We Romans may be a superstitious bunch, but we're perfectly aware that our relationship with the divine is purely give-and-take. You give them prayer and obedience when you want something, or when they let you know in no uncertain terms just how badly you've upset them."

Hannibal said nothing. The Romans would blaspheme even their own gods.

"You know," Scipio said, rising from his seat, "This isn't the first time we have faced one another across the battle field."

"Really?" Hannibal stood as well. "When did we meet before?"

Scipio slowly walked toward the north side of the tent. "Oh, I believe I first fought you at the River Trebia, and then at Lake Tresimene."

"As a commander?" Hannibal thought he knew the commanders he had faced those times. "You're still alive, aren't you?" Scipio's smile was becoming an irritant to Hannibal. "I saw you one other time besides those, of course. I was there at Cannae."

Cannae. That name pierced Hannibal's calm.

Scipio was one of the few survivors of the Battle of Cannae. This more than anything worried him. Cannae had been Hannibal's greatest victory, a towering achievement by any standard. Outnumbered near three-to-one, Hannibal's army butchered one out of every ten Romans of fighting age, tens of thousands in a single bloody afternoon.

The Romans should have surrendered. It was suicidal to continue. It was madness. Yet every emissary Hannibal sent after that battle was rebuffed at the gates of Rome. Every soldier, save Scipio by his rank, were exiled to Sicily for the traitorous act of surviving such a disastrous battle, for not beating their swords into dust, for not splintering their shields, for not tearing off their armor and striking back with it, for not clawing every Carthaginian and Gaul to death with tooth and nail.

Hannibal had killed a quarter of the Senate of Rome at Cannae, and yet they refused to ransom prisoners. They proclaimed the uttering of the word 'peace' illegal.

Such stubborn refusal of reality, such utter obstinate madness demanded a response. His cavalry commander, Maharani urged Hannibal to march on Rome itself. After Cannae, he said that the Romans would surrender without contest. But Cannae had hurt his army as well, and Hannibal lacked the equipment to carry out a siege on the 'Eternal City'. His men were tired and needed to rest.

Maharbal then said, "You know how to win a victory, but not how to use it."

And this young Scipio had been present at the slaughter of Cannae. Hannibal knew, more than any other, the power of vengeance. This boy had been sharpened against a whet stone of Hannibal's own devising, and the resultant blade was poised at his throat.

"General?" Scipio said, a notable lack of concern on his face.

"Yes?"

"Would you step this way? I believe you'll enjoy this." Hannibal followed warily, unsure of the Roman's intentions.

Scipio stopped short of the mouth of the tent and gingerly grasped one part of the flap with his hand. As he drew the canvas back, Hannibal was blinded by the sudden reappearance of the sun. After a few moments, he blinked away the spots that swam before his eye.

Further afield, Hannibal could see the Roman camp. Its banners appeared normal, at least as normal as they always appeared. After a few moments' concentration he thought he could make out the individual banners.

With a sudden, distilled horror Hannibal realized that he had seen those banners before. They were the banners of the Roman Legions Hannibal buried at Cannae. Hannibal's shock must have been apparent as when he glanced toward Scipio the Roman could barely contain his triumphant grin.

Hannibal turned immediately around, nearly collapsing as his knee threatened to buckle again.

He managed to stay up, but he knew the Roman had seen his weakness. He stalked out of the tent, throwing back the canvas flaps between him and his own camp. He dare not turn around, lest he should see that terrible face behind him.

"Bastard," he said. "Those banners ... those damnable banners."

"General?" Burdoc said, "Is something wrong?"

"He raised his legions from Cannae! Those are the same banners!" It was a sign. It must have been. This was the gods telling him that Maharbal had been right. Now he stood against not one blade whetted on vengeance, that damned Scipio, but a field of blades, entire legions. Legions that had been exiled and betrayed by their Senate. Legions that had been promised a due reckoning by a single Roman General. The Roman Hannibal had outperformed the original, had raised the dead and promised it the vengeance it so desired.

Vengeance would be had tomorrow, one way or another. Nothing was as powerful as vengeance.

"I should have taken us there," he snarled, "I should have marched my army, still bloody from its work at Cannae, to the very gates of Rome. I should have tom its walls down around their ears! I should have ground the statues to dust, melted down the city's gold."

Fuming in his spiteful silence he cursed himself for not killing that Roman whelp at Cannae. Tomorrow would be a grim day for that mistake. It was not a battle between a Roman and a Carthaginian, a battle between toughness and quickness. This was a battle between Hannibal of Carthage and Hannibal of Rome.

"I should have carved every name from every monument, tomb, and gravestone, given the Vestal Virgins to my officers, and heaped the priests upon towering pyres raised atop their own temples! I should have burned Rome to the ground and salted the earth, that nothing should again ever take root there in that blasted wasteland, be they shrub, beast or man!"

As he passed through the gates of his camp, in the deepest part of Hannibal's dreams he could hear his father's voice, whispering behind him.

"You sound like a Roman."