

THE WAR GOD'S MEN



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The War God's Men

A Novel of the First Punic War

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For Roli

“What a beautiful field we leave for the Romans and Carthaginians to fight in!”

–King Pyrrhus of Epirus, 276 B.C.

“Delende Est Carthago” (Carthage Must Be Destroyed)

–Marcus Porcius Cato

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Prologue

The Romans Wash Their Hands In The Sea

Strait of Messana, 264 B.C.

In the gathering gloom, a light rain had begun spitting in his face and Appius Claudius Caudex was making a dash across the strait.

He clenched his jaw, letting the rain drip. It galled him. A consul of Rome, stealing into Sicily like a thief in the night. The risk was great: 20,000 men crossing a hostile sea under an escort of but a handful of borrowed warships. Of course, there was cause for fear.

But it galled him, nonetheless.

The consul could see that his tribune, Gaius Claudius, was aching to speak out, but held his tongue. By now, the tribune knew the strait as well as anyone. As part of a diplomatic delegation, he had made the trip from Rhegium to Messana twice in the previous week. The first time, he had been turned back by the appearance of a Carthaginian war fleet. The second, crossing at night, he had at least been able to disembark. But Rome's demands had been rejected out of hand by Carthaginian and Syracusan alike. Neither, he had been informed, would abandon the siege of Messana, Rome's ally. Roman honor could not tolerate this, but the Carthaginian commander had been clear. "Rome will not be allowed to even wash her hands in the sea!" he had exclaimed with sneering arrogance. "This remains to be seen," Gaius Claudius had replied boldly, striding from the room. But neither he nor the consul felt so bold now. What if the Carthaginian's threat had been no idle boast?

The ships of Claudius' fleet, more than one hundred of them, filled the sea all around him. Thousands of oars bobbed and strained through the waves. The growing wind whipped the low-hanging clouds until they roiled as turbulently as the seascape below them. A fine, cold mist — a discouraging mixture of sea-spray and rain — showered consul and tribune alike. Their flagship, a trireme borrowed from the city of Tarentum, was one of the few decked warships in the fleet. Most of the fighting ships were mere fifty-oar pentekonters, little more than open rowboats. Unlike Rome, the Greek colonies of Magna Graecia in southern Italy at least had a seafaring tradition. They had provided all of the warships in Claudius' fleet, along with experienced oarsmen and crew. Claudius had long advocated the need for a Roman fleet to counter Carthage, but his pleas had been ignored. What did the Senate care when it was Claudius who had to sneak across the strait with only wind, weather and darkness to protect him? Even the triremes and pentekonters of the Italian Greeks were obsolete,

certainly no match for the modern warships of Carthage.

Even in the failing light, Claudius could see the rowers in the nearby warships as they grappled with their oars, the cruel bronze beaks of their ships' rams slicing through the waves. The mainmasts and sails had been disassembled and stowed in Rhegium. The added weight would have only slowed them down. The transports carrying Claudius' legions relied solely on the strength of their rowers' backs to power them.

"What is it, Tribune?" Claudius asked finally, seeing that some issue continued to weigh heavily on Gaius' mind.

"What chance have we to reach Messina without interference?" the tribune asked. The thick mass of Sicily loomed on the horizon.

"None," Claudius replied. "The harbor in Rhegium was swarming with spies."

"Carthaginian spies?" Gaius asked in a surprised tone. "I saw only traders."

"Spies and traders... It is all the same, Tribune. Little happens in the Middle Sea without Carthage knowing."

"Well, hopefully we will reach Messina before they know we've left Rhegium."

"Our only hope is speed and the coming darkness. Hannibal Gisgo," Claudius said, referring to the man who commanded the Carthaginian fleet, "will not risk a battle in the darkness."

"Certainly not in this weather," Gaius said, hopefully.

Their fleet was bearing north-northwest. Clinging to the toe of Italy, Rhegium lay south of Messina, so it was before them that any threat would materialize. Claudius gazed toward the northern horizon, satisfied with the increasing gloom. The strait was treacherous in the fairest of weather. Claudius had not wanted to attempt a crossing at night any more than the Carthaginians would have dared contest it. He could not take the risk. With his entire army packed into over one hundred ships, even a single accident would be a tragedy; a large-scale mishap, a catastrophe.

Better to time his crossing as near to nightfall as possible. It was part of the plan he had worked out the previous evening with one of the clever Tarentine captains.

"With darkness descending," the captain had said, "the Carthaginians will have a short timeframe in which to attack us."

Not for the first time, Claudius asked the man to explain. Claudius was a long-time senator, a newly elected consul, a politician. Although he understood the need for sea power, he himself was no naval man. The more he had listened to this particular captain speak, the more he valued his opinion. The captain exuded a natural authority and the other captains and military tribunes who had assembled in Claudius' command tent listened attentively.

"Because," the captain explained, "the Carthaginians are tied to their naval base, here." He showed Claudius a map and pointed to the extreme northeastern tip of Sicily, Cape Pelorias. "At minimum, they have a quarter-day's round trip. Our own journey will take just a fraction of this. Not only must their timing be precise, but they must leave themselves enough time to return to their base before nightfall."

"They will not simply patrol the strait, waiting for us?" Claudius asked. Judging from the inexpertly concealed expressions of the other captains, he felt that it must have been a foolish question.

"Oh, no," the captain said. "Warships simply cannot remain at sea long enough to

make an effective blockade. They can attempt to patrol, as you say, but there will be long gaps. Chance alone would put their fleet in our path.”

“And why is that?”

“The men need food, Consul. They especially need fresh water. Not even a Carthaginian quinquereme has the storage capacity for these things. You will see on our triremes that there is simply no space. They must put into shore every night, just as we do.”

“Oh, yes. Of course,” Claudius said, nodding.

“This Hannibal, who commands the fleet, must first be informed of our departure, then deploy his fleet and travel to the strait. Not an instantaneous reaction, to be sure.”

So with darkness falling, Claudius felt at least a little comforted that his inadequate war fleet of ten obsolete ships might be required to do little more than delay the powerful Carthaginian fleet, if it showed itself at all.

“By acting aggressively, however,” the authoritative captain had gone on, “we might be able to discourage them from attacking. If we make it clear that killing us will not be effortless, they may disengage.” The captain smiled at his remark. Unspoken by the group was the fact that, while the destruction of the Roman warships might not be effortless, it was, given Carthaginian inclination, certainly inevitable. The captain might have smiled, but his colleagues listened grimly. Claudius marveled at the bravery of these men. The colonies of Magna Graecia had only been incorporated into the Republic during the previous decade, but here were her men — Locrians, Neapolitans, and Tarentines — offering their lives for Roman honor.

So it was ten warships to face the might of Carthage. The captain and his colleagues had then worked out a plan, to Claudius’ satisfaction. His faith in these men was absolute.

But now, despite the captain’s assurances, Claudius was not so certain they would need the plan after all. The horizon remained empty, and Messina drew near. Claudius’ thoughts turned to the problems involved in the deployment of his legions, and his heart quickened. No one was more aware of the momentous nature of his undertaking: the first Roman conquest off the mainland of Italy. He knew there would be more, if he had his way — *and* his fleet. But whatever the future held, his name, Appius Claudius Caudex, would forever be linked with the crossing of the historic threshold. The men might have been interested in plunder, but for the senior consul of Rome, the opportunity was for glory, the currency of power.

“When we step off these ships into Sicily,” Gaius said. “We are at war with Carthage.”

“When we enter Messina,” Claudius replied, “Messina becomes a Roman city. If Carthage wants war, she will have it.”

They could see Messina now. Diminutive against the massive bulk of the island, the city’s structures of white stone and mud brick stood out starkly along the shoreline. In a moment, the Roman fleet drew close enough for the men to make out the wind-whipped flames of torches that burned on the walls along the harbor, their reflections flickering in the water below.

Claudius’ optimism was short-lived.

“To the north!” Gaius pointed into the distance.

Claudius turned and saw a warship pulling through the heavy sea toward them.

Waves crashed over its bow, exposing its deadly ram. It was a quinquereme, a ‘five’, so-called because five men, as opposed to three for a trireme, rowed each bank of three oars. The ship was sleek and fast and flew Carthaginian banners. In a moment, Claudius spied another behind it, and then another — all fives. Even from a distance, he could see that they towered over the smaller triremes of the Roman fleet.

The captain of the trireme rushed to Claudius’ side.

“Your orders, Consul.”

“Signal the quick-rowing, captain. Send out the covering force.”

The captain turned at once and began bellowing orders, putting the Tarentine’s plan into action: six ships to confront the enemy, four to remain with the transport fleet. The signalman waved his flag, struggling with the two-handed flagstaff in the strong wind. Claudius heard officers shouting from the rowing deck, and the drumming of the mallet, the “*thump...thump...thump...*” became “*thump-thump-thump-thump*” and the oars splashed through the waves to the quicker beat. Soon the entire fleet was moving at the new rapid pace.

The signalman then flagged the warships and a small group of triremes and pentekonters split off from the main force. They sped toward the onrushing enemy in two files, oars pounding the water. In the distance, more Carthaginian ships came into view. Their mainmasts were empty, sails stowed for battle, but the little foresails billowed in the increasing wind as the vessels, in line abreast, bore down fast on the approaching triremes. Even as Claudius and the tribune watched, the Carthaginian crewmen began removing the foresails as well, with practiced efficiency.

“Now we’ll see how Tarentines and Locrians fight,” Claudius said. “They are skilled rowers. Not like Romans.”

“Will they fight?” Gaius asked. “That is the question.”

“We will find out soon,” Claudius said. “They need only hit them hard once, and then beat a retreat. That should give us time to reach the harbor. If our Tarentine captain is correct, the Carthaginians will have no stomach for a fight. The triremes are smaller but more agile. That will have to see us through.”

“Even now darkness falls,” Gaius said hopefully.

In all, seven Carthaginian quinqueremes rowed out of the gloom to the north on the roughening gray sea, their oars perfectly aligned, beating soundlessly. Claudius watched their implacable advance in awe and fear. Their empty mainmasts towered above their decks, sticklike crosses. They looked like an approaching line of scarecrows.

To Claudius, they looked like harbingers of death.

The sea-faring trader had arrived at the Carthaginian naval camp just after midday. His report was of the launching of the Roman transport fleet. The crossing was to be completed before nightfall, the man had said.

Hannibal Gisgo had heard many reports over the past few days, and he was of a mind to ignore this one. He had his own spies in Rhegium and in Messana. Half his fleet was already out patrolling the strait. Apart from the trader, holding out his hand for some coin, he had heard nothing of a crossing.

“Another political delegation?” Hannibal had asked dismissively, referring to the first crossing he had thwarted.

“An entire army,” the man had said finally, and convincingly, despite his sly demeanor.

Hannibal had arched an eyebrow. Twenty thousand men. That was worth some coin, anyway. Perhaps it was even worth a look.

During the past week, information had been profuse, and was largely contradictory. Hannibal had all the information he cared to hear, perhaps more than he could bear. What he did not have was a clear directive from Carthage. Had Carthage not promptly returned the first captured Roman ships, with apology? The last thing Carthage wanted was war with Rome. Hannibal had hurled the latest correspondence from the Council to the ground where it remained, trodden on by all who entered his command tent. The slyly worded missive, as Hannibal interpreted it, directed him to prevent Roman troops entering Sicily — while not precipitating war.

“Welcome to the strait of Messina!” Hannibal had cried, dashing the parchment to the ground. “Home to Scylla and Charybdis, indeed.” These mythical entities guarded either side of the strait. One was a man-eating beast that lived in a cave, the other a whirlpool that swallowed ships. You could not avoid one without falling prey to the other.

“Scylla and Charybdis would feel at home in Carthage, would they not, General?” said the captain of Hannibal’s flagship, well aware of the hopelessness of the task before them.

Hannibal felt he could live with the monsters. They at least made few demands. It was clear that the exalted Council of Carthage did not understand the risk. No one knew better than Hannibal Gisco the dangers of navigating the strait. He had lost his first ship attempting to blockade Messina, taken onto the rocks by an unexpectedly strong northerly current — and that was during good weather in the middle of the day with not a single enemy ship in sight. That he should now risk the strait in the failing light and heavy weather to engage in combat with an enemy whose captured vessels might simply be returned to them while operating with uncertain intelligence and under contradictory orders... Well, he had had better assignments.

“Feeling confident, Captain?” Hannibal asked. The two men now stood on the aft deck of Hannibal’s flagship, the *King of Epirus*. The ship was the massive septireme, a ‘seven’, Carthage had captured from Pyrrhus during the king’s expedition to Sicily, twelve years before. It was the pride of the Carthaginian fleet, and Hannibal’s personal joy. To him it represented the might of Carthaginian sea power and the futility of opposing her. If the great Pyrrhus had been unsuccessful, what hope had an obscure regional upstart like Rome?

“I would feel better if I knew how we should react to the appearance of a Roman fleet,” the captain said.

“We will destroy them, Captain,” Hannibal replied. “If the gods will it,” he added. He was in full war regalia: bronze breastplate and plumed helmet, his sword sheathed at his waist. “The enemy warships are nothing but triremes and pentekonteres. We can ignore them and fall on the transports.”

“But does not that mean war, General?”

Hannibal paused in thought, and then heaved a sigh. He slammed his fist on the rail.

“Damn the Council! Let them crucify me, if they will!” he cried. “If the Romans put their legions into Sicily, there will be no end of war. The Council must know this.”

“I agree,” the captain said.

“Still, I would not go into battle on a night like this,” Hannibal said. “I do not wish to tempt the gods — or the Council’s good graces. But I am sorely tempted by slaughter.”

“The transports?” the captain asked.

Hannibal nodded. He knew he would not be able to resist unescorted transports if that was how he found them. He was not so sure he would be able to resist a full-out battle.

Hannibal’s fleet consisted of fifteen ships, all quinqueremes but for his flagship. Once they had drawn near to where he suspected the Roman would cross, he arranged his fleet in two lines abreast, seven in the first, and eight, including his flagship, in the second. This conservative arrangement matched his mood. To speed their progress, he sailed with foresails deployed and had stripped all ships of their customary marine contingents, normally forty or fifty soldiers each. He had retained one-hundred-fifty marines on his flagship as a precaution, but he did not anticipate any boarding actions.

He stood outside the small canvas deckhouse, feeling the wind. He could hear the rhythm of the drumming below decks and the monotonous croaking of the dip and pull of the oars. To his left and right, the white foresails of his fleet made billowing crescents as they captured the wind. Joined at the horizon, sky and sea roiled in equal measures as the dark mass of Sicily towered to his right. It was no night for sailing.

“The ships are having trouble maintaining their lines,” the captain observed. He was watching the sterns of the first line of ships before him. From their vantage point in the rear, they could see how the vessels veered from strictly parallel courses. Wind and waves pushed them to and fro as they advanced. Skilled rowers, professional and highly trained seamen, struggled to keep the ships aligned. Dangerous gaps had appeared between them.

“We shall have to find these Romans soon,” Hannibal said, noting the deepening gloom on the horizon. Behind him, all along the 140-foot length of the septireme, the marines sat on long benches that lined the gunwales, clutching their javelins, spears, swords and shields. Many of the men sat with their heads between their knees staring at the deck beneath their feet. Seasickness, nerves, boredom or fear, Hannibal thought. Maybe all at once.

“There they are!” the captain exclaimed, gesturing excitedly.

Hannibal looked and indeed the Roman fleet was coming into view. At first, he saw only the warships. They were as he thought, old-fashioned triremes and even open pentekonters of an ancient design. For an instant, he pitied their crews, brave men manning a fleet suitable only for chasing down pirates confronting the greatest naval power in the world. The transport fleet rode the waves behind them. Hannibal saw one ship, and then another, and then dozens upon dozens of them. He could see that the crossing was almost complete. The leading ships were already in the harbor. He would fight them within sight of the city. Good, he thought. Let the people see the slaughter; let them see the Romans for what they are.

“Prepare for action, Captain,” Hannibal said.

“Warships sighted!” the captain cried. “Prepare for action!” At once, there was a bustle of activity on the deck as crewmen began lowering the foresail.

Two files of warships approached the Carthaginian lines, three ships in each file, six

ships in all. The leading ships were triremes; the trailing vessels were lost in the gloom. The triremes beat aggressively toward his lines. The large eyes painted on their hulls at the water line made them look like skulking cats gliding silently through the waves, their tails curled high over their backs.

“Take it slow,” Hannibal said. “Let’s see what they do, fight or dance.”

The Roman ships came on boldly. At first, Hannibal was surprised by their aggressiveness. Then one of the files began to back water, reversing its oars, just as he had predicted.

“It’s a feint,” he said. “Full ahead, captain. Look! They flee before us!”

Behind the Roman warships, Hannibal glimpsed a sea full of helpless freighters, churning at full speed toward the Sicilian coast. This time, the reports had been correct. The Romans were attempting a crossing on a large scale. Some of the ships towed the horse transports for the cavalry. Ripe fruit for the plucking.

“We’ve got them!” the captain exclaimed.

“Four full legions at sea,” Hannibal said. “Signal the full ahead. Let’s go get them!”

Greedy excitement swept through Hannibal’s fleet. Each ship’s oars slapped the water in unison as the Carthaginian quinqueremes raced toward the backing triremes of the Roman column. The Roman rams menaced the fives. The first line of Carthaginians paid them no heed and pushed on for the transports. The second line would deal with the warships, if necessary, thoroughly and at leisure.

Not all of the Romans had backed off, however. Unnoticed in the excitement, the second file of triremes continued to race toward the Carthaginian line. The speeding ships’ bows rose upon the waves, exposing their bronze rams through plumes of billowing foam. By the time Hannibal noticed them, it was already too late.

“The enemy comes on!” he cried when he saw that the attack here was not a feint. “Close up! Close up!” he shouted helplessly.

At the last instant, the first line captains seemed to wake to their predicament. They began turning their rams to face the onrushing Romans. But it was too late. The lead trireme had already entered a gap between ships. As it approached one of the fives, it suddenly pulled in its oars and glided alongside the speeding quinquereme, neatly shearing off its still beating oars. A great cracking of splintered timbers filled the air, as if an entire forest of trees had been crushed underfoot.

Hannibal burned with rage. Even at a distance, he could hear the screams of the rowers as the splintered stumps of their oar handles thrashed, breaking limbs and cracking skulls as the rowing deck was plunged into bloody chaos.

The Roman trireme sped past the now helpless five. Its oars reappeared and the Roman ship, clear of the enemy line, began to turn toward its next victim, aiming for a stern attack.

The Carthaginians were astonished. The stricken ship, bristling with splintered oar shafts, drifted hopelessly, battered by waves. A second trireme raced into the widening gap and beat hastily toward the enemy broadside. Its ram plunged into the drifting five, cracking its hull just below the waterline. The sound of shattering timbers and the screaming of oarsmen rent the air. Water rushed into the gaping hole.

The first Roman ship, in turning, had exposed its broadside to the rams of the Carthaginian’s second line. Not one of the captains failed to see it. In the next instant, the nearest five had reached ramming speed and plowed into the trireme. The blow

caused the smaller ship to lurch violently. The Punic ship backed away skillfully and the sea poured into the Roman vessel. Hannibal watched with satisfaction as the trireme began to list. Roman crewmen leapt from the sinking ship. The rowers were trapped inside. Soon the bodies of the dead rode the waves with the same indifference as the detritus of shattered timbers that bobbed and pitched alongside them.

The same fate awaited the ramming trireme. No sooner had it backed away from its quarry than it too was cracked open by a speeding quinquereme. It began at once to slip beneath the waves. The final Roman ship, a pentekonter, turned and sped away, its low profile allowing it to disappear quickly into the darkness.

The Roman attack had thrown the Carthaginian fleet into confusion. No one had expected it.

Hannibal watched the pentekonter vanish into the gloom and wondered what it meant. Were more ships waiting there? He had already lost a modern quinquereme to an antiquated Roman trireme, surely a presentiment of doom.

“Signal the recall!” he cried. He had only counted six Roman warships. More awaited out there in the darkness, obviously, unseen and ready to spring another trap. The Carthaginians could not maintain their lines in the heavy seas, exposing vulnerable broadsides. The Romans came at them no more, but Hannibal would not row blindly into the darkness. “Get those ships back here,” he said to the captain.

“But we can still make the transports, General,” the captain said, though his eyes were troubled. The Carthaginian fleet was a jumbled chaos centered on the two sinking triremes, the only enemy ships still in sight. The damaged Carthaginian quinquereme drifted miserably to the edge of the gloom and was lost to the night and the wind and waves.

“Signal the recall, Captain,” Hannibal repeated, menacingly this time. “We’re going back to base. The Romans are in a fighting mood, but I am not. I will not lose my fleet to these clumsy pirate hunters.”

“But surely we can no longer avoid war!”

“Signal the recall. Signalman! Fetch my fleet! Captain, look for survivors.”

The order was passed along and the fleet began sorting itself out. Ships slowly rowed in wide circles, avoiding the capsized triremes and halting as they crossed one another’s bows, regrouping around Hannibal’s septireme. Soon, he had arranged his fleet into two columns and it began beating a path north, back in the direction from which it had come.

Under other circumstances, Claudius might have been amused. The centurion was having such a hard time of it. Swearing oaths, he grabbed curious by-standers and shoved them roughly off the beach. But no sooner had he cleared away one than another took his place. He looked like a luckless goatherd losing a battle with a mindless, determined flock. He cursed the Sicilians. Most of them were locals from the surrounding countryside, but some had walked two hours from Messina to see the curiosity that had washed up on shore.

“Get away from there, you stinking crows!” he shouted. A small group had found something amid the rocks and had hunched over it. The centurion rushed up to them and started pulling them one by one from their little huddle. “Go home now!”

Other soldiers tried to keep the crowd back with their spears, but it was the

centurion who expended the most effort.

Claudius motioned toward the gathering crowd. "Disperse these people," he said to the tribune. Gaius turned and signaled to the troops who accompanied them. They immediately fanned out and started clearing the beach, to the relief of the centurion's men.

"There it is," Gaius said. "Just as reported."

"A Carthaginian quinquereme," Claudius said with great satisfaction.

They made their way down to the beach. There, perched in the rocks some distance offshore, was the great Carthaginian ship. It lay at an awkward angle, its bow inclined slightly so that the eyes painted on its prow stared unblinkingly into the long golden rays of the morning sun. Most of the oars on one side of the ship were gone; those on the other bobbed and pitched lifelessly in the surf.

Already, on the horizon, they could see a small fleet of triremes pulling toward the scene to begin towing operations. Unseen inside the ship, workmen hammered and shouted as they labored to make the vessel at least temporarily seaworthy.

"How goes it, Centurion?" Claudius asked when they had reached the beach.

"Consul!" The centurion looked surprised, but gathered himself quickly, straightening in salute. "The wreck is secured," he said, perhaps a little over-optimistically, the consul thought.

"Are those ours or theirs?" Claudius asked. He indicated the dead bodies that had washed face down onto the beach and others that rose and fell with the waves among the rocks.

"A little of both, sir," the centurion replied, his expression turning cross. "I'm doing my best to keep the crows off them."

Claudius knew that he referred to the people, not the birds. The birds, he saw plainly enough, would take what they wanted.

"The people strip them of their clothes and sandals," the centurion said. "Meager booty, I'd say!"

"Keep them away from the ship, Centurion."

"We need this beach cleared," Gaius said in a commanding tone. "You must cordon off this entire area." He swept his arm expansively. "You need to bolster your pickets. This is starting to resemble a festival down here."

The centurion saluted and rushed off, shouting commands at his men as he encountered them.

"If the Carthaginians know their ship is here, they might come back to get it," Gaius said. "These men need to work quickly."

"Our engineers in Ostia will be very interested in this ship. A modern quinquereme!" Claudius said. He looked out at the sea at the approaching Roman triremes. "By the gods, Gaius, we did well today!" he said, suddenly overcome.

The younger man clasped his shoulder, smiling.

"You will have your fleet, Appius Claudius!" Gaius exclaimed. "You will have your fleet after all!"

PART I
The Siege of Acragas

Chapter 1

June 262 B.C.

Megellus gazed past the workmen constructing the camp to the vast plain beyond. There he saw the long marching files of his legionaries, men in all manner of armor and dress. They wore mail shirts and small, square breastplates. They carried javelins, spears and swords and heavy oblong shields strapped over their shoulders. Feathers and crests of horsehair sprouted from their helmets. Their weapons flashed whenever the harsh Sicilian sun found them.

Squads of scarlet-cloaked cavalymen flanked the foot soldiers. Beyond them rose great clouds of dust thrown up by the wagons of the pack train that creaked and clattered for miles into the distance. Foraging parties had already scattered into the ripe fields and a defensive cordon of infantry had been thrown forward to protect the camp workmen as they dug and chipped at the earth.

The air was filled with the sound of their digging. Megellus watched the soldiers as they lifted their shovels over the rim of the enclosing trench, piling the earth high along the perimeter of the camp. They were now five days' march outside of Messana, one day west of Acragas. For each of those five days, the soldiers had constructed the Romans' nightly fortress. Inside the perimeter ditch, colored flags marked the locations of the various parts of the camp — the soldiers' lodgments, their officers' tents, areas for supplies and horses. Megellus' command tent itself, the *praetorium*, was marked by white flags. In less than a few hours, the whole would be enclosed by a ditch which itself would be backed by an earthen embankment. This would in turn be surmounted by a wooden rampart made from the sharpened stakes each legionary carried with him. Twenty-thousand men and their animals would soon take up residence for the night in this mobile Roman city. Camp by fortified camp, the army had crept across Sicily toward the Carthaginian stronghold of Acragas.

Tomorrow, they would arrive beneath the city walls. For Lucius Postumius Megellus, one of the consuls elected for the year, the next day could not come soon enough. The other consul, Vitulus, had taken a parallel route from Messana and had encamped his army a few miles to the north. The next day, they would combine at Acragas, forty thousand men in all. Megellus already had an idea what the Carthaginian response would be: they would, of course, surrender. When he gazed upon his assembled legions, he wondered how they possibly could not.

To the north, some kind of caravan was just arriving with an escort of Roman cavalry.

"A delegation from the city of Enna," the tribune Laberius announced with a smile, by this time knowing the consul's feelings on the matter. "They want to declare their

allegiance to Rome.”

Megellus was not surprised. Throughout the march from Messina, emissaries from one city or another had pestered him endlessly. This delegation looked far more lavish than the usual, however, and he wondered how much of his time would be lost dealing with it.

Megellus sighed. “Oh, why can’t they treat with Vitulus?” he lamented, shaking his head.

“They bring ground wheat, wagonloads of dried meat — *and* a small herd of cattle,” Laberius told him, barely able to suppress a grin. Like most of the military tribunes, Laberius was a young man, not yet thirty. His father was a senator, as Laberius himself would be one day. Megellus knew the father and found the young man to be a levelheaded and thoughtful lad, not given to bouts of comic diversion. Yet he was clearly enjoying Megellus’ annoyance. The army had come to within a day’s march of Acragas and had met no enemy, not even a picket, so Megellus’ mood was light.

“They are going to have to wait,” Megellus said, glancing at the bustle all around him.

“Oh, but they are very eager,” Laberius said. Megellus shot him a look and Laberius could hold it in no longer. He laughed outright. Megellus frowned.

“Before you become too annoyed, Consul,” Laberius said, still chuckling, but collecting himself quickly when he saw that the consul’s light mood did not extend to the troublesome caravan, “might I remind you of Valerius Maximus. More than sixty Sicilian cities fell to him last year, and he was awarded a triumph in Rome. He no doubt suffered this same grief.”

Who could forget Manius Valerius Maximus? “Messala,” he was now called, the name commemorating his conquest. He was one of the most famous men in Rome. A fresco on the wall of the Senate House depicted his victory. He had defeated the enemies surrounding Messina. Forming an alliance with King Hiero of Syracuse, he had established Roman control over all of eastern Sicily. What he had accomplished in the east, Megellus now hoped to achieve in the Carthaginian west.

“Acragas is the gateway to western Sicily,” Laberius said. “Just as Messina was to the east. I am frankly surprised the Carthaginians have put troops into such a forward position,” he added. “I would have expected them to hunker down in Lilybaeum, Panormus and the other port cities where we cannot get at them so easily.”

“It is a mistake they will soon regret,” Megellus said, instantly forgetting the delegation from Enna. After Valerius’ campaign in eastern Sicily, the Carthaginians immediately began recruiting an army, the initial elements of which they had thrown into Acragas. Megellus and others in the Senate had argued that they planned to use Acragas as a base for an invasion of Roman Sicily. Megellus had carried the day, and now he was tasked with capturing the city, control of which would forestall any Carthaginian aggression into Roman territory. “Acragas is a city of doomed men,” Megellus added.

“Our own men are spoiling for a fight,” Laberius replied. The tribune was interrupted by the sound of angry cursing. Both men turned and saw an enraged centurion red-faced from shouting. Part of the embankment had slid down into the ditch, taking a clumsy soldier with it. Under the brutal tongue-lashing, he scrambled out of the dirt, looking like he would rather it had buried him entirely. Other soldiers

pounded their stakes into the mound with hardly a glance at the man. The perimeter was almost finished. Tents would be erected next. "And eager for plunder," Laberius added, looking away from the centurion to the 'color party'. The men were laying out some more flags under the supervision of one of the other tribunes.

"They will have their plunder," Megellus said. "I am not so certain they will have their fight, though."

"You think the Carthaginians will not offer battle, Consul?"

"Look around you, Tribune. Nothing but Romans as far as the eye can see. Where are the enemy scouting parties? Their skirmishers? I suspect the Carthaginians in Acragas are not expecting us. When they look out tomorrow and see two consular armies beneath their walls...Well, I am prepared to offer them terms."

"So you will allow them to leave the city?"

"I want only Acragas," Megellus said. "Not some poor mercenaries the Carthaginians throw in front of our swords."

"It will no doubt be just as it was for Valerius," Laberius said. "All of western Sicily will crumble."

"The capture of the city will be felt throughout Sicily."

"Worthy of a triumph, Consul?" Laberius asked with a shrewd look.

"Glory enough for all of us," Megellus said with a laugh, clapping the young tribune on the back.

They stood for a while, watching the progress of the construction. Megellus was filled with admiration for his soldiers and officers, hard men who knew their business. Among them, he felt unnecessary and without purpose

"Shall we go and have a look at what our Sicilian friends have brought us?" he asked, remembering the caravan. He looked down at the group and saw the Roman escort sitting their horses idly on either side of the long wagon train. Fronting the wagons stood the extravagantly attired headman and his party, milling restlessly. "I understand they have brought us a herd," Megellus added, rediscovering his good humor.

"Indeed they have," Laberius said.

The consul and the tribune started toward the group, but the delegation held little real interest for Megellus. He peered past them to the marching columns of his legions and he realized that, by coming here, the Sicilians had predicted the conqueror of Acragas; they had chosen sides.

To Megellus, the choice seemed an easy one, for who could stop these Romans?

"There is a fine line between boldness and lunacy," Juba told the boys. "Pyrrhus was a great man — and bold! — but he was also a lunatic. You see? That was his downfall."

Gauda, Hannon and Tabat said nothing. Gervas shrugged. He did *not* see; in fact, he was scarcely even listening. But when Juba looked at him, he nodded sagely. Wide-eyed, Hannon and Tabat nodded too. Gauda did not even pretend to be interested and just kept walking.

The Numidians were half a day's ride east of Acragas. Juba led the four horsemen, on foot, up a sharply rising slope. The rest of the ten-man troop remained at the base of the hill. They had all dismounted and sat amid their horses. Some sucked at long stems of grass plucked from the ground; others lay back, looking up at the sky. Juba