



# *The* **SWORD** *of* **HANNIBAL**

Ten unlikely adventurers  
challenge a mighty empire—  
for vengeance, honor and a  
miraculous blade!

**TERRY McCARTHY**

# The SWORD of Hannibal

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## **Author's Note**

When Western civilization was still young, every nation, city-state, and tribe was dominated by two superpowers: Carthage and Rome. The two military behemoths squared off and the bloody struggle raged for years across the Mediterranean.

# Chapter 1

**S**trabo couldn't have seen the soldiers coming, not in his condition.

His only thoughts were that if this was earth, it was earth that rose and fell like the sea and bright light bathed him when he thought it should still be night.

It must be daylight. He could feel the warmth of the sun on his back, a back once scarred by fire and now ever wary of the sun. He couldn't prevent a salty slurry of seawater from rising up his throat and rushing out of his mouth onto the sand. He rolled over painfully. His left side bore the wound of an unmistakable sword slash four fingers long. Cleaned by the sea, he noticed dimly, it didn't bleed much. Not too deep.

The beach was stained with wide plumes of blackened sand and a stench hung over the surf. He lay drenched, nudged by an ebbing tide. The sea was gentle now with morning and the passing of the high winds that beset the hellish night before. He struggled to gather his wits and they came to him in a jumble.

A routine trading fleet, they had been thirty-seven ships

and now they were none. The hostile Carthaginian navy had appeared unexpectedly behind them at midday. The merchant fleet had run before them with the rising wind for as long as they could. The Carthaginian commander must have known the approaching storm would overtake them eventually, though the wind held to the fleeing fleet's advantage for hours before they were caught.

The storm had hit them all, pursuer and pursued. Then the pursued had run out of sea at the Majorca points, those jutting promontories that protected shallower waters from the heavy seas to the west. The merchant fleet had to curtail sail just to stay afloat, and when they did so, they were cornered.

Fat with lumber and tin from the Moroccan inland, their boats wallowed helplessly before the nimble galleys of the Carthaginians. Boat after boat was boarded and put to the torch by flevaum, those long-range flaming arrows favored by the Carthaginian navy. A navy that had no need for lumber—only destruction. They ruled this end of the Mediterranean Sea with time-honored violence.

Clutching his side, Strabo managed to pull himself up and survey the immediate landscape. He was reminded of all those swimming lessons at the hands of his older brothers along the riverfront, upstream from his father's fishing fleet and the floating detritus of cleaned fish drifting in wide beds out to sea. His young arms had churned furiously, desperate to escape, his lungs screaming and his limbs struggling as his older brothers forced him beneath the surface. He would slip away, only to be accosted again, and in this way his experience with water was well practiced. *Thank you, brothers, long gone that you must be.*

What of Nabulam and of Ozgul? Ozgul had leaped over the side just as the enemy's boarding platform shuddered wickedly onto their deck. He looked resolute one moment and then panicked in an instant and leaped with a wide-eyed glance over his shoulder. His leather shoulder armor flapped behind him like powerless wings and he vanished into the sea. He must be gone. He could not survive those heavy seas, for he was no swimmer. And Nabulam. He was . . . Where was he? He was last seen on the quarterdeck extending those useless prevention poles that the attackers snapped easily as they came within range. Nabulam and those he labored futilely with; they must all be lost.

Strabo could not know that, in truth, the Carthaginians had left six ships floating. But only those with ivory; these they towed away.

The beach was a landscape of charred destruction. Blackened spurs from burned keels lay scattered about, some pieces only a span in length, others as tall as three men. Littered over the sand were burned oar pieces and rigging, blackened hull sections and wagon chassis, and shattered Phoenician cargo boxes. Nothing on the beach stirred unless rocked by the storm's lingering surf.

The broken skeleton of Strabo's doomed fleet surrounded him. As did the bodies. Blackened bodies and blackened limbs, bloated by the sea. The sea had its fill of humanity that night and so regurgitated hundreds of corpses up and down the beach. Probably fifteen hundred lives lost all told, Strabo thought.

The soldier in Strabo took stock of his situation first, his weapons second, his body third, and his resources last. The situation was obvious. He was alive. As to weapons,



he had none. He was injured and weak, but felt stronger than might be expected after hours in a storm-tossed sea. And what resources did he have at his disposal? Only himself.

His weapons were lost in the attack, but not before his favorite sword saved him when the deck was overrun by howling Carthaginians. He killed three of them in his escape. The first charged clumsily with pylum upraised and Strabo simply stepped aside, wrenching the man's spear away and using it to pull the man off balance and onto Strabo's out-thrust sword. Though the man's mouth opened wide and his eyes bulged beneath arching brows, he made no sound save for the thud of his body striking the deck.

He encountered the next man on his way down to the foredeck. The man stabbed at Strabo but missed. Strabo cut him down in an instant and muscled on through the shrieking throng, all swinging limbs and weapons and bodies lunging frantically and slipping on the bloody deck.

He made it nearly to the bow when he saw another war galley coming, its ramming equipment raised and bearing down on his ship from one hundred paces away, its prow pawing the waves like a mad bull. He had no time!

The storm threw pellets of rain into his eyes as he turned back and sprinted along the high rail line toward the stern. There were fewer men here, most now fallen or forced to the center of the ship. Over his shoulder he glimpsed the new galley accelerating terribly toward them. Sixty paces, fifty paces. Strabo heard the pounding of the warship's drum. Ribbons of tattered sail glanced off

his face as he ran along the rail line, the sea only spans below him as the boat heaved unnaturally in the gale.

Forty paces, thirty. Then a man on the rear deck spotted him. The man stood nearly two spans high, tall for a Carthaginian. He bore a leather and bronze breastplate, forearm shields strapped tightly to his thick wrists, and a hip thong with bronze leggings. The man positioned himself in Strabo's path and waited patiently, twisting an Attican long sword in his hands with practiced familiarity and blessing his luck that he would trip across such an easy kill this far from the delirious fray on the main deck below.

With nowhere else to go, Strabo continued straight at him. The man raised his sword as Strabo approached, intending to cleave Strabo in two like a standing log. As the man's sword reached the top of its arc, Strabo surprised the soldier by diving headfirst toward the man's feet! The soldier brought the sword down in a flashing arc.

But Strabo was sliding on the wet rail deck with his short sword drawn.

He slid into the man's legs and, with a desperate slash, sliced one of them off clean below the knee. The man's sword came down off balance and sliced into Strabo's side, hacking off a chunk of flesh and taking a piece of his rib before thudding into the wet wooden deck with little sound, so sharp was the man's weapon. His severed leg separating from the rest of him, the tall man toppled like a broken pole. Strabo was doused in his blood as he slid beneath him and past.

Twenty paces. Ten. The war galley closed on its prey with a roar. There was no time for Strabo to contemplate

the now legless soldier's undoing as the new galley closed on the ship and crushed into it at all speed.

Strabo rolled to his feet, surged forward, and charged off the stern of the ship into midair.

The iron-plated prow of the attacking ship took them directly in the side and the shudder reverberated through both boats. The impact was of forty tons of matériels natural and man-made; iron and wood, heavy canvas sail and clay provisioning containers, leather rigging and stone tables, mahogany sparring, and thousands of stones' worth of lumber and tin. All colliding at speed in the middle of the night with nothing but ninety fathoms of angry salt water between the collision and the floor of the Mediterranean Sea.

The shock of the impact rocketed past Strabo as he seemed to hover, if only briefly, his sword swinging above him in a futile bid for ba' nce in the space where man was not meant to balance, here above the hungry sea like black marble below him, the sea that yanked him from the air and into the coldness of its belly below.

Ripped as he was from a burning cargo vessel teeming with the grunts and cries that come only from hand-to-hand combat, the plunge into the sea insulated him from the din above. Now he had only the wind and the waves to contend with. And the wound in his ribs.

Ships were sinking all around him, but he was able to swim free of the confusion. The cargo fleet had tried to hug the coast in the hopes of anchoring in if the wind grew too much for their heavy ships and overburdened sails. They had not gotten close enough. Strabo squinted through the waves, and after he rode the top of a dozen swells, he guessed he was within three leagues of shore.

Not an easy swim, but he thought he might make it with the wind at his back. If not for his side, screaming now after the initial numbness. Each wave launched a cascade of needlelike mist before it as the heavy wind caught the crest. Between gasps Strabo caught an occasional glimpse of a distant shoreline far off in the darkness.

His arm smacked painfully into something hard in the water, a harboring oar. Now the wind bore him and the oar toward the shore far away. He struggled to keep his head up and his mouth clear of the sea, and when each moment was right, he would gulp for breath in throaty gasps.

Three leagues is a long way, a half a day's trip over land on horseback. And this was a bellowing sea. After several hours of struggle, he forgot about the trading fleet and the fat fee owed for his services. He forgot the men he had killed to escape and the men he knew on board.

After several more hours, he gave no thought even to who he was. His own identity held little importance out here. He seemed only to be along for the ride as the body of a man clung to a hunk of ship and struggled to breathe through the spray of the wind and the waves. There was no sky, no light, no boats. Just water and wind and spray. And noise. The wind howled at him and water assaulted his ears incessantly, loudly spattering him when his head was above water and grinding his ears with salty froth when his head was submerged. The dull roar of it all deadened him.

The waves ground his tunic over the harbor oar until the cloth disintegrated, feeding the sea just as surely as his ship had.

Strabo's sense of time left him. All was water and kicking and trying to breathe. There was no shore in this

world. There were no people or families or livestock. No love, no courage, no faith. He was an insect, with an insect's mindless mind. Clutch. Kick. Gulp air. Endlessly.

Anesthetized by the ceaseless water, he would proceed until his body sacrificed everything a living thing could—then finally give out. He would be unaware of this happening and would drown with no thoughts. In a vacuum. Gone.

This seemed as sure a fate as any when the seabed suddenly reared up to peel from the water at last and become a shoreline, then to stretch into a plateau beyond that. The plateau crouched between the sea and the ancient foothills that lined the east coast of the vast Spanish Peninsula. The sea coughed Strabo up onto a beach studded with high rock formations leaping from the sand in jagged fountains of granite.

And now here he lay, just another scattered remnant of a dead fleet.

Foggy as his thoughts were, he knew he had lost his sword. He didn't like being exposed out here on the beach, weaponless. He tried to stand up only to crumple over on his injured side.

He winced and tried again. He rose to a wobbly knee and knew he could not stand. He thought he would lie down for a while and regain his strength.

Then he heard them. He swiveled around, exhaling painfully. There, fifty paces away, was a Carthaginian shore party. Three soldiers of lower rank and a fourth sporting the armlets and leather shoulder wings of a field officer. Strabo wasn't sure, but that thing off in the distance bobbing at the water's edge must be their dinghy. Strabo knew there would be other shore parties up and

down the coast. They were here strictly for surveillance, to see what had washed up on these remote shores. They were shuffling across the sand, kicking at pieces of burned tinder and tiny masked crabs as the creatures skittered by.

With a sigh, Strabo eyed a craggy assemblage of rocks towering nearby. A choice defensive position, he thought. He could scramble into those rocks, climb high, and keep those tons of granite between him and danger. He could lob stones from up there and maybe escape to higher ground or simply hide and never be discovered in the first place. If only he could get there.

The safety of that rocky outcropping was only paces away, but it might as well have been a league. He spat, or tried to spit, but there was no saliva left in his drained body. The shore party had him.

Strabo knelt unsteadily in the sand and swayed as the men reached him. They were dirty, muscular, and bristling with weapons. One grinned at him from beneath a helmet of cheap bronze, beaten to crude shape by some drunken forger at camp. His few remaining teeth were brown and broken. The soldier was typical of the desperate mercenary types in the Carthaginian army. The man asked his commanding officer, "Can I take his nose?"

The man spoke Greek, which was no surprise to Strabo as the Carthaginians favored the tribes and allies that could speak Greek, the closest thing to a common language in the Mediterranean world. Good communication was an asset to an army, as Strabo knew well.

The officer was impatiently scanning the beach, ignoring Strabo. "No time for that, kill him. We have ground to cover here."

Strabo knelt helplessly before them, his neck vulnera-

ble to the inevitable deathblow. But he could hold himself up no longer and dropped heavily to the sand, face first.

"See how the condemned man bows before me!" The soldier with the rotten teeth laughed. The others enjoyed the joke with assorted grins and smirks.

"Look at me!" the soldier shouted at Strabo, and kicked him heavily in his wounded side. Strabo grunted from the pain of it, delirious now through his fog of exhaustion and loss of blood. He rolled over on his side. What little strength remained, he used to clutch his ribs.

Down in the sand, Strabo's last thought was of a man blocking out the sun, his hand on his sword hilt. Strabo's state of mind was such that he could only manage the thought that his shirt of armored mail still clung to his shoulders. Strabo's mind swirled upside down and then fainted to nothing.

In the real world above him, his executioner's commanding officer barked, "Finish him. Let's be off." With that, the soldier with the brown teeth unsheathed his sword with a ring and raised the shining weapon above his head. His comrades stepped back to give him swinging room. Strabo's executioner flexed his muscles and drew in a large breath, preparing to bring the sword down with steadied force, when his companions suddenly regarded him curiously. The heavy metal point of a long-iron Spanish war arrow had appeared jutting from his throat, spitting a fine mist of red that rained down over the man's armored neck cowl.

The executioner's eyes bulged and he stumbled forward to fall next to Strabo in the sand, still gripping his weapon with both hands. An arrow shaft the length of a man's arm was strung through his neck. The others spun

quickly, reaching for their weapons as the whirl and hiss of feathered, spinning shafts filled the air around them. *Thunk! Thunk! Thunk!* The arrows found their marks with the sound of shafts piercing flesh and skidding to a halt at the first bones they met.

Porcupined with arrows, the entire shore party dropped as one to the sand. Dead.

From the outcropping of rock that Strabo had deliriously considered, ten wiry men appeared from where there had been none. They wore pants with leather panels stitched inside each thigh. Their hands were callused from a lifetime of holding the reins—for they were first and foremost horsemen. Their hair ran long and dark into small braids that dangled down their necks.

They descended on the dead Carthaginians with short daggers and made quick work of them, efficiently lifting their heads and slitting the soldiers' throats for good measure. Working in twos, they dragged each corpse down the beach and flung the dead into the surf and the retreating tide.

Two of the men quickly fashioned a stretcher from the shore party's spears and cloaks. They heaved Strabo's limp body onto the stretcher and disappeared with him into the safety of the rocks.

The beach lay quiet now in the morning sun except for the lapping of the weakening waves. Minutes later, a line of horsemen appeared on the ridge high above the beach. They led two extra horses rigged with the loaded stretcher suspended between them. The troop dropped out of sight over the ridgeline, heading west. Heading inland.

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*Hostilities between Carthage and Rome were escalating rapidly, resulting in an unambiguous directive to the Carthaginian navy from headquarters: Clear the sea-lanes and sweep the east coast of the Spanish Peninsula clean. The navy ranged up and down the coast patrolling ports and accosting any shipping associated with Roman interests. And they weren't being subtle about it.*