

Swords of Rome

by Christopher Lee Buckner

Hello readers,

The following is chapter one of my Roman epic, Swords of Rome.

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I hope you enjoy this preview.

PART ONE CHAPTER ONE

“Blood, Mago — I want blood on my sword!” Hannibal yelled as he turned to face his younger brother, Mago Barca. “Yet, my blade remains sheathed in its scabbard, unstained!” His mood had been bad for the past several weeks. The siege was not going well. This was made worse by the fact that his men's nerves seemed to be wavering with each day the city of Saguntum held, now over eight months. And, with each week that went by was another that Saguntum greatest ally, Rome might send its legions from Italy to Spain in defense of its treaty.

Hannibal wanted war with Rome, it was his eventual goal. But, he needed Saguntum and its supplies if he was going to make the crossing over the Alps and supply his forces once he was in Italy. More importantly, he needed the support of the nearby Gallic tribes,

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which watched eagerly at Hannibal's success or failure. If he won the siege than they — tens of thousands of fearsome barbarian tribesmen would flock to his cause. They, with his Spanish and Carthaginian forces would swarm like a locus horde. Yet, if he failed to take Saguntum his allies might turn against him, seeing weakness in his resolve and challenge his stronghold in Spain; New Carthage might fall. If that happened, how long before Rome followed and took what remained of Carthage's new territories in Spain or even the attacked the homeland?

“The city elders are weakened from starvation and thirst, brother. I doubt they could hold week longer. By then we might be able to present terms for their surrender,” Mago tried as best he could to put a positive spin on their situation, but he knew his brother too well to know anything but absolute victory would satisfy his craving.

“Terms?!?” Hannibal rebuked. “I want those walls! I want the city fathers heads on spikes for their defiance! I want the grain and, not to mention, our men want the cunt and booty that awaits them in Saguntum!”

“Then, brother, barring an earthquake or an act of the gods, I doubt our intents or the wants of plunder and rape for our men will be enough to bring down Saguntum's walls.”

Hannibal leered at his brother for a long while, not angrily, but focused as his mind was drawing up a plan of desperation. It was in these moments of crisis that Hannibal knew he was at his best — when his back was up against the wall that desperation gave birth to his greatest and most daring plans. His father Hamilcar, who had never lost a battle against Rome during the war in Sicily a generation ago, had taught him to never run from a superior foe: *It was only when faced with an rival that was larger, meaner and stronger than yourself did one truly understand your own worth*, he would say around the campfire.

“Get your men ready to storm the gates when I give the signal,” Hannibal finally broke the long silence as he leaped down from his horse and pushed his way through the bodies of the gathering soldiers. Mago did not ask any questions as this was the reaction he

was hoping to see from his brother. He looked around, noticing the prying eyes of dozens of men standing around him who had overheard the whole conversation.

Smiling wide, Mago drew his sword and held it up over the head of his horse.

“Well, do you want this fucking city or not!” Mago cried as loud as he could. His men roared as they raised their assorted blades to the sky, bashing iron against their shields, and bellowed murderous expectation. Saguntum was going to fall and everyone and everything in the city would be theirs for the taking.

Gisgo hadn't time to scream before an arrow plunged into his right eye socket. He had done his duty as one of Hannibal's bodyguards — giving his life so his general may live. Hannibal liked and respected the big Numidian who had first served with his father decades earlier. He had three sons back in Carthage and a dozen more bastard children here in Spain. Hannibal vowed that he would tell Gisgo story, about how he had died bravely in battle, even if the veteran never saw the man that took his life.

“Keep moving forward you dogs!” Hannibal barked as he urged the torrent of men all around him to push against the onslaught of arrows, slingshots and rocks being hurled from the stone walls. Hundreds were wounded as they bled on the ground, trampled by their comrades that refused to waver behind Hannibal's urging. They knew they had to reach the rampart and begin to scale the walls or more of them would be going to the underworld before the day was done. Hannibal, however, did not attend to be among them. He was determined even if he had to tear down Saguntum's walls with his fingernails, stone-by-stone, he would. To fail would mean certain death, either by his supporters here in Spain, or back home in Carthage where generals who failed in the field were often crucified outside the city walls.

Finally, within the mud-soaked ground of blood and gore the first set of ladders rose to the rim of the stone walls. Archers from

the ground did their best to insure they stayed in place as men made ready to scale them.

Gripping one hand tightly around the base of one ladder, his shield held firmly in the other hand, positioned above his head, Hannibal turned towards his army and cried out, "Follow me to glory! Saguntum shall be ours! The wine, the gold, and the cunt are ours for the taking!" His men bellowed with excitement as Hannibal was the first up the ladders, soon followed by dozens more men across the length of the southern wall.

The defenders held fast as they threw down a volley of arrows and stones. Men's heads caved in, and bodies feathered, but still they climbed with maddening determination never before seen as Hannibal was the first to reach the top. He did not know if anyone had followed him. He had heard over the deafening roar some of those below him fall to their doom as their bodies were crushed by falling stones and well aimed slingshots. Regardless, he pressed forward and locked sights on the first man — a boy really that came within range of his sword.

Hannibal was no stranger to killing. He had taken his first life when he was eleven years old, and had trained to use a sword the moment he dropped the rattle. He was a Barca, a famed and feared family of Carthaginian warriors that knew nothing of defeat or dishonored. As the oldest son of Hamilcar — a man in his own right that was a terror to the Romans during the last war with the republic for control of Sicily, a great deal was expected of Hannibal. He was groomed from boyhood, like the kings of Sparta or Macedonia to take up his father's mantle and carry out his dream of a Mediterranean world dominated by Carthage, and not the upstart city-state of Rome. So far there had been one setback already with his home-state's capitulation during the last war, and the dishonor that followed the Mercenary Wars soon after when Carthage could not pay the armies it had paid to fight Rome, now turned against their mother state. Hannibal would restore his beloved city's status in the world — he would elevate it at any cost.

To think, Hannibal's father used say, that Carthage is responsible for Rome existence. If it weren't for our help they would never have overthrown their old kings. Now, look what they've done to our great nation. We are but a shadow of our former glory. But, you, Hannibal, you and your brothers will reclaim Carthage's honor and restore our rightful place at the head of Mediterranean — as it should be. Those words had echoed through Hannibal's head since he was a boy, more so now in the past year than ever before. However, he knew what he did now wasn't just for his father's memory, or for Carthaginian domination, but for himself as well. If he could do what kings and warlords, barbarians and Greeks could not do before — topple the Roman Republic, he would be a god made flesh — forever immortalized as one of the greatest generals of all-time — if not superior even to Hannibal's own idol, Alexander the Great.

The man that Hannibal sighted, a boy no more than fourteen who crewed the wall, holding a longbow in his hand, drawing arrow after arrow never saw Hannibal coming as he hurled himself over the wall. He was so focused on his duty that he only stopped firing when Hannibal's sword ripped through the soft flesh of the boy's neck in one effortless motion.

The second man that Hannibal sighted was another archer, older by a decade, only just barely managed to glimpse him before Hannibal drew his sword in a violent horizontal arch, which sliced across the man's face. The right eye socket exploded with gore as the eyeball ruptured as the impossibly sharp iron blade tore through flesh. The man screamed in pain before he stumbled forward. Those cries ended as he plunged over the edge of the wall and fell onto the collection of densely packed Spanish and Carthaginian soldiers down below.

Hannibal moved with blinding speed as he attacked once more a third opponent. By now the walls were choked with dying men as more of Hannibal's soldiers had joined him, fighting up and down the length of the narrow walkway that was set between two forty-foot stone towers.

A spear came in high towards Hannibal's head, but he managed to raise his shield just in time to parry the blow away. Striking low, Hannibal counter by jabbing his sword into the man's exposed right knee. Blood and bone jetted out from the wide wound as the man bellowed in agony before Hannibal rose back to his feet and rammed his shield as hard as he could against the man's broad chest.

As the defender fell to the ground, Hannibal stood over the lying man and rammed the bottom of his shield into the defender's mouth, shattering teeth as the layers of wood sliced all the way through the man's cheeks, nearly cleaving his head in two.

Hannibal winced in pain for a moment as he bore down on his teeth. A sword had slashed across his exposed flank, cutting deep in the fat of his back. Already he could feel his own blood gushing out, but thankfully his chain mail armor had saved his life or otherwise he would have been dead.

Turning sharply Hannibal drove his sword into the man's face that had just attacked him. His sword lodged between the defender's skull and the back of his head for a moment, causing Hannibal a great deal of difficulty in trying to pry his weapon free. It was then that he heard several heavily armed men come rushing behind him. He glanced back for a moment and saw infantry charging up a set of stone steps, hoping they could repel the attackers before the walls fell.

Hannibal was trapped. He was forced to release his attempts to retake his sword from the man he killed and turn to face the charging infantry. Raising his shield while holding it firmly against his shoulder, Hannibal screamed a battle cry before he charged. He threw all two-hundred and thirty pounds of weight, plus armor against the collection of infantry, driving his shield into the first man who gasped as the air was knocked out from his lungs on impact. Hannibal cursed under his breath as he was cut once, twice, and then three more times across the arm and legs — not deep enough to slow him down, but painful enough to sap what strength he had left.

With one final burst of energy Hannibal bellowed and murderous roar and pushed against his shield, throwing the dozen men that stood on the either side off of him, but in the process he lost hold of his only defense as it was stripped from his grip and cast aside.

Hannibal, his head dripping with crimson blood bore his teeth as he raised his fists. He would not fall so easily he vowed, but then before the first foot soldier could charge him, he was struck dead-center by a well-aimed spear throw.

The soldier staggered back as he fell into his comrades as several more spears were thrown from behind Hannibal easily found their mark.

Hannibal turned and saw his bodyguards and several Carthaginian soldiers come rushing towards him, crying out, "Save Hannibal! Defend the General!"

Ordax, one of Hannibal's Spanish-born bodyguards handed him a new sword as the remaining groups of infantry and archers on the wall were easily dealt with. Soon after, the only men on the south wall were Hannibal's, who raised their weapons to the sky and roared his name in one thunderous body, HANNIBAL! HANNIBAL! HANNIBAL!

"Do you want this city?!?" Hannibal bellowed joyfully.

"Yes!" Everyone roared.

"Then open the gates and take what is rightfully ours!"

Hannibal, with his bodyguards and a dozen other men charged down the stone steps. Most of Saguntum's defenders were in a blind panic at this point as they ran once it became clear the walls had fallen. A few officers, however, tried to form a phalanx and repel the invaders, but their efforts were not enough as Hannibal charged forward, his destination the southern gatehouse.

Most the men Hannibal cut down, he did so as they turned and fled, dropping their swords or spears, and even more foolish, their shields. Those that stood their ground died just as easily. As brave as these men might have been, they weren't warriors. The wealth that poured into Saguntum made its people fat and lazy, much like

Romans. If this had been a Gallic stronghold, Hannibal knew he would have to fight to the last man to claim victory.

Hannibal's eyes open wide with surprise as a small trickle of a smile cracked in the corner of his mouth once he saw a well-dressed — well armored and armed officer he knew by the name of Ballista. What made this captain of the guard valuable beyond his rank, as it was Ballista that had marshaled Saguntum defense over the past eight months, was that he was also a Roman citizen, sent by his senate when Saguntum declared its loyalty to the republic some years ago. The man had been a constant annoyance for Hannibal as he had represented the city elders during the various negotiations over the past eight months. Stubbornly, Ballista had been confident in his defiance's, which had now collapsed all around him.

"Hannibal, you shit-eating dog, face me yourself, if you have the courage!" Ballista sneered with bitter disdain as he held his ground, sword and shield at the ready with a dozen trusted men standing before the gatehouse, each refusing to move.

Hannibal grinned, "Finally, a Roman," he said under his breath. "The Roman is mine! Gut the rest," Hannibal then demanded as his men roared their excitement before they charged in a mad fury towards the waiting defenders.

Ballista squared himself as Hannibal neared him, yet not attacking. Hannibal could see not just from the man's age and many scars to his arms, but too from his form that the Roman was seasoned from many battles hard fought and won. A worthy adversary, or so Hannibal expected.

"I always knew you were a cunt, you barbarous dog," Ballista barked as he obviously hoped to break Hannibal's concentration and force him to attack ill-rationally, but Hannibal would not allow himself to be baited.

"You should have given me the city when you had the chance. It would have spared you a lot of pain, Roman," Hannibal added as he slowly advanced. He held no shield but wielded a heavier sword than Ballista, which placed him on the offensive as Ballista remained

fixed behind the thick wooden layers of his blue painted shield, his gladius held low to the side — the tip just barely visible.

“Even if Saguntum falls, Rome will make you —”

Now! Hannibal thought as he lunged forward, attacking Ballista before he could finish his sentence, and despite his large size, the sudden outburst of speed and the fury of Hannibal's attack threw Ballista off-guard as he was forced to fall behind his shield for protection, which rattled horribly under Hannibal's assault.

The Roman captain barely managed to hold his ground. He did not seem used to such savagery in combat as Hannibal fought like a caged bear set loose upon the population, swinging his large iron sword as if it weighed nothing, causing thick chunks of wood to splinter free from Ballista's shield with each violent bash.

Ballista was driven back off of his feet as he tried desperately to keep his shield held firm. To lose it now would put him at a serious disadvantage as his shorter sword, good for thrusting, was not ideal against Hannibal's longer cavalry blade, which had several inches the length over his gladius. But, after a dozen devastating blows that made Ballista's arm feel as if every bone in it had been broken, he could not bear the onslaught further as his shield was finally knocked free.

Ballista screamed in agony as a bone in his wrist did indeed snap. His shield, now broken in three pieces splintered to the ground as it dropped into the mud-soaked ground. Before he could react Ballista only saw the blur of Hannibal's blade come racing toward his face. A moment later he felt the sharp sting as his flesh unzipped as the tip of the iron blade was drawn across his brow, down his nose, and tearing out a chunk of his right cheek.

Hannibal's strike had been done purposely. He did not attend to kill Ballista, not yet.

“You filthy whore!” Ballista spat a mouthful of blood, which landed against Hannibal's broad leg as he stood poised over him. “You think you've won a great victory here? You've accomplished nothing! Rome will see you crucified at the stake for this crime. I

only hope you live long enough to see Carthage burn and its people sold into slavery before your end will come, dog!”

Hannibal smiled as drizzles of Ballista's blood dripped from his sword tip.

“It is Rome that will burn, and it is your senate that will lick the *shit* from my feet before I'm done. But, I'm afraid you won't be alive to see that day come to pass.” Hannibal reached back, brining his sword high over his head before he plunged it down with all his might.

The heavy iron blade sliced into Ballista's head, splitting his skull like a burning stone drenched with water. Brain and bone mixed with hair and blood gushed over Hannibal as he held his sword firm for a long moment as he savored his kill — the first Roman he'd ever slain in battle. He knew with eager anticipation that Ballista only represented the first among many. Soon, even if it took years more Hannibal would build on his victory here and march across Gaul, over the Alps and into Italy. The people there would rise and join him to be free of the republic's yoke, and soon, with his will and the armies he shall raise in the coming years, gods willing the walls of Rome will be torn down and the arrogant people who think themselves superior to other men will bow before Hannibal, begging with their dying breath for his mercy.

The rest of Ballista's men were dealt with in short-order as Hannibal's guards slaughtered all those that stood firm against their overwhelming numbers. Within moments the first men stormed into the gatehouse, slaughtering those defenders still within before freeing the city gates from their chains.

The ground rumbled as Hannibal stood among the dead. A moment later as the southern gate opened his brother Mago and twenty riders charged into Saguntum, followed by hundreds more soldiers that ran in all directions, roaring with murder on the mind as they moved deeper into the city.

“Well done, brother. I'm sorry you left me so few to kill,” Mago grinned as he stopped his horse near Hannibal, who looked almost

unrecognizable as he was covered head —to-toe with the gore of his enemies.

“There are plenty more waiting to face our iron, brother. Do not let them wait much longer,” Hannibal replied, Mago laughing hard as he reared his horse and ordered his men forward. The city was open to them and in a few hours, there would be no male left alive to defend it.

“Please general, I beg you!” the cries of the city-father were cut short as the axe blade sliced through the soft flesh of his neck, freeing his body of the burden of the man's head, which rolled carelessly onto the blood soaked ground before it was picked up by one of Hannibal's men, and tossed into the pile of two dozen other skulls that sat near the corner of the citadel walls. This same scene had been repeated two dozen times over the past hour as Hannibal, standing with his brother by his side, his drunken men surrounding him, stood with a wide smile as he watched his enemies fall before him, one by one.

The sun was still set high in the sky, beaming its blazing heat down upon the ruins of Saguntum, which burned as its streets and buildings were filled with the terrifying screams of women being raped, and men botched like pigs. The blood that had soaked Hannibal caked and dried like that of an erred lake bed as he took a long swig of wine before passing it to his brother.

“Ah, it was a hard fight — long and brutal, but you did it, my brother, you truly did it!” Mago bellowed as the warm honey wine drizzled down his gullet. “But, shouldn't we spare at least a few of these vermin to ransom to Rome?”

“No. Rome, and all those that hear of this victory will learn what it means to defy me, brother,” Hannibal replied harshly as another man was dragged forth, an older man, fat, wearing a Roman toga, looking to be in his early sixties. He begged for his life as so many others had already, offering his captives all the riches they could ever hope to spend. Little did he know, Hannibal already had

everything the man own, save for his life, which he was about to take momentarily.

"So what now? One victory does not make us conquerors," Mago asked bitterly.

Hannibal snorted. Mago was the most pessimistic of his brothers. However, it was his realistic view of the world that made him valuable to Hannibal's campaigns. He wasn't interested in *ass-kissers* like that of a Roman consul.

"No, it does not. But, this victory will go a long way in subduing those Gallic tribes that stand in our way. Those that's weren't afraid of us will now back off, and those that will stand before us, we can pay off."

"And those that don't do either?" Mago asked.

Hannibal turned towards him. "We crush," he answered simply.

As the old man's head was taken and his body, which twitched violently, was dragged away, Hannibal reached out and took back the wine skin before taking a deep breath. "But, Rome is not Saguntum. It shall not prove as easy."

"Eight months is hardly easy," Mago commented, knowing full well that wasn't what his brother was speaking of.

"Indeed. There will be many more battles, harder fought that we will encounter, brother, and our men must be ready. I want only the strongest for this journey. The trek and those we face along the path to Rome will weed out the weak. When we reach Italy, Rome will be facing an army the likes it has never seen before."

Mago smiled as he slapped his brother on the shoulder. "Then my brother, we have a lot of work to do before your war with Rome can begin. Maybe even year's worth before the first drop of Roman blood is spilled.

Hannibal smiled as his mind drifted to the days and months to come, perhaps even years, it did not matter how long it took as he was one step closer today to his goal than he had been yesterday. After a lifetime, his family's wraith was finally being turned where it was meant to be directed. Rome and all those that serve under its banner would bleed.

