

The Elephant in the Room

by Ed McWatt

from 'Six Nasty, Brutish and Short Stories from Ancient Rome'

www.edmcwatt.com

Copyright 2022

The mail-shirted guardsmen swung the heavy wooden doors open on command and - as intended - the Roman delegation was caught unawares in the anteroom, still conferring in a huddle. Flamininus, long experienced with tinpot eastern kings, recovered himself immediately. He plastered a humble, pleasant look onto his long face and strode into the throne room. A deep nod of the head was, his advisor had reminded him, both an appropriate and adequate reflection of the relationship between Rome and Bithynia. 'Your majesty' the Senator boomed across the twenty foot gap between him and the man seated in the ornate, gold-leafed chair set on a raised platform. The room was small and unlit by any natural source of light. Smoking oil lamps hung from various rafters and wall fixtures. With the exception of the throne, it was a dingy place.

'Titus Quinctius Flamininus' the king replied warmly, taking care not to mangle the unfamiliar syllables. 'We are honoured by your presence in Bithynia.'

'Prusias, it is I who am honoured by this audience with you' the Roman replied, just as warmly, moving closer to the king.

'Please - be seated and drink something' the king instructed, waving on a male slave who placed down a gilded chair in front of the royal dias. Flamininus thanked his host and sat, accepting the silver goblet of wine offered by a girl in a white headscarf. He knew better than to drink it, letting the liquid - *no doubt harmless but one never knew with these people* - touch his lips but not enter his mouth.

The required formalities of diplomacy completed, the room became silent as both men waited for the other to speak again and reveal where the power in the relationship between their countries lay.

'I had heard you had crossed into Asia but am not clear why' Prusias eventually said.

Flamininus smiled back noncommittally and took another fake sip. Years of negotiations like this had taught him that the less important the king, the more they will want to fill the silence.

'How can my little kingdom be of service to Rome this time?' Prusias continued, and no-one listening could have mistaken the slight edge of annoyance in the question.

The Roman smiled at the king of Bithynia.

'The Senate has asked me to come here, Prusias, and to retrieve something that belongs to it, and that has been misplaced for too many years.' This was true, as he had carefully worded things. The Senate had in fact needed a lot of convincing that Flamininus' mission should take place at all.

Prusias felt a jolt of annoyance towards this supercilious man - *why did Romans never just speak plainly, why always these oblique references?* The feeling of anger was rapidly replaced with a sense of dread as to which of his idiot captains had overstepped the mark this time. He spread his hands, pushing them downwards in a calming gesture.

'I can promise you, Flamininus, that if any of my subjects has wronged Rome in some way, that harm will be undone and the man punished -'

The Roman interrupted with a wave of his arm. 'Forgive me Prusias for speaking in riddles, it's a horrible habit I've picked up from spending too much time with other Senators. This isn't about one of your generals accidentally raiding the wrong seaside villa.' Prusias breathed out involuntarily in relief on hearing this. 'This is about a man that you have under your protection. A man with whom Rome has unfinished business.'

Hannibal Barca the king instantly thought, his mind flashing to the last time he had seen the old soldier, in this very room. *A month ago? Six weeks? No, certainly no longer than that.*

'You know of whom I am speaking?' Flamininus prodded, dragging the king back into the present.

'I can't think of a single person in my kingdom who fits that description' Prusias replied, managing to inject a hint of confusion into his tone, eyes scanning the ceiling for an answer. The Roman sighed audibly. He could not afford to let word of his mission precede him, or the old man would slip justice once again.

'I am quite certain he is here, our information is impeccable. I would not otherwise travel hundreds of miles and waste your valuable time asking for you to hand him over. Do I need to speak his name?'

Prusias looked blankly back at Flamininus. He didn't quite have the nerve to shrug, but his face offered no encouragement. The Roman decided to pursue a different line of attack.

'The second matter which the senate has asked me to raise is your ongoing spat with Pergamon.' This was also, very narrowly, the truth. The Senate wanted the war to end so that trade could return to its normal, profitable state.

Prusias shifted slightly in his throne, a shot of pain from his lame leg reminding him of the price of battle, paid long ago but still costing him daily. The neighbouring city of Pergamon to the south was a piece of persistent and irritating grit in his shoe.

'We have every right to defend our borders from unprovoked attacks' he stated with offended propriety.

'Indeed. But less right to burn every one of their ships that falls into your hands. And no right at all to send assassins to poison King Eumenes and his family.'

Prusias bristled. 'I know nothing about that, and anything that has reached the ears of the Senate is no more than hearsay designed to manipulate you.'

The white head-scarfed girl chose this inopportune moment to attempt to refill Flamininus' untouched goblet of wine. He gently waved her away with a smile and she retreated back

into the shadows. 'Relax, Prusias' he proffered. 'I have perhaps given you the wrong impression. Rome is interested in the trouble between Pergamon and Bithynia being *resolved*, that is all. To that end, I am here to make an offer of assistance.' Prusias frowned at the shift in the conversation's direction. Flamininus carried on, moving further past his limited remit with each word that followed. 'I'm sure that the dispute over where the border should be drawn could be cleared up - and enforced - if we provided surveyors and moved a legion into the area for a few months.'

'And the trade with Macedonia?' Prusias interjected quickly, surprised that Rome was offering to take his side, yet determined not to let the moment pass without exploiting it fully. 'Eumenes sinks my ships constantly - there are more of my goods at the bottom of the sea than in the markets of Greece!'

'That too can be satisfactorily concluded,' the Roman said affably, 'perhaps with an exclusivity agreement on the trade of certain products. Backed up by our navy patrols, of course.' These things were not Flamininus' to promise, but he was confident that the Senate would accept the price once he returned with the treasure that Hannibal had stolen in the twenty years he had spent marauding through Italy. The Roman found himself drifting into a day-dream of riches and had to drag his attention back to the room.

Prusias sat back in his throne, the pain in his leg temporarily forgotten. This was unexpected. His mind whirled with the opportunity of what was being offered, and the cost. *I can't believe they want the old man this badly. What is he now - seventy? Completely harmless and close enough to the grave not to need a helping hand. He hasn't got any money left either, my spy at the castle tells me he's penniless.*

'Hannibal Barca is my guest' he said slowly, breezing past the first mention of the name of the man he had just denied knowing. 'And I cannot lightly break the duty I therefore owe him.'

Flamininus' smile became even broader 'Of course, and I wouldn't expect you to. All I ask is that you allow me to meet with him and communicate a request of the Senate.'

That didn't sound too bad, Prusias rationalised. Hardly a betrayal. Well, not one anyone could blame him for.

'I can have you guided to his castle as soon as we have written down the agreement on the border and the shipping. Elissa here knows the way'. When she did not immediately appear, the king snapped his fingers and called out her name more loudly - 'Elissa!'

But the girl in the white headscarf was nowhere to be seen.

* * * * *

Every time she turned a corner of the twisting streets leading down from the palace, she tried to snatch a glimpse over her shoulder without giving the appearance of looking. Evening was passing into night and the small city's workers, merchants and shoppers had long since headed for home, only the occasional drifter or hurrying slave were to be seen. Elissa was fairly certain she was being followed - a vague, man-shaped blur had stayed with her for the past few turns through the almost deserted city. She could feel her heart rate climbing, the blood starting to ring in her ears as panic began to set in. *I have to warn him.*

She picked up her pace as she headed downhill towards the port, towards the sailing boat that he had provided for just such an occasion as this. Another corner, another glance - the blur was resolving into a clearer figure, cloaked and hooded, definitely not a local. Was it her imagination or could she hear his footsteps closing? Elissa swallowed back her fear and scanned the street ahead for an opportunity to lose him. A narrow alley opened to her left and, a few feet along it, a recessed and darkened doorway. She quickly stepped into its shadows and stood motionless in the gloom, trying to suppress her deafening breathing.

The footsteps scurried past, then skidded to a sudden halt. Elissa strained her ears to catch a hint of what her pursuer was doing, too frightened to risk looking out from the safety of the doorway. She carefully folded back her headscarf to hear more clearly. The street seemed silent, with just the disembodied voice of a frustrated ox-cart owner drifting over from some nearby thoroughfare, followed by the crack of his whip and the responding complaint from the animal. And then nothing. Nothing but the blood pulsing in her ears. She waited another breath and then slowly edged her head forward to see past the frame of the doorway.

The man's hand closed around her throat before she had even had the chance to scream in shock. He stepped fully in front of the doorway and lifted Elissa physically from the ground. She clawed at his hand in instant desperation, feeling the tough leather of a glove and knowing it was useless. His hooded face leered up at hers, a face she recognised from Prusias' throne room. The man had come in with Flamininus and had stood at the back whilst the Roman and the King had spoken.

'Where're you running to, slave girl?' he crooned with mock playfulness. Elissa could do nothing but stare dumbly back. 'Prusias might not have realised who you are, but we know everything about you.'

Her eyes involuntarily darted left and right as her brain fought for options to keep her alive: she had no thought for anything beyond the need to get air into her lungs within the next ten seconds. She squeezed out a hoarse offer to her attacker.

'I'll talk - I'll tell you where -'

He dropped his arm a little and Elissa felt her toes touch the ground.

'Don't worry about it' the Roman replied 'Prusias is going to tell us where the terrorist is holed up.' He released his grip and she collapsed to the filthy alleyway and drew several deep, painful breaths. Her mind whirled. *Terrorist?*

'What do you want with me then?' she eventually managed.

'A bit of fun, I guess' the man shrugged. 'Couldn't just let Hannibal Barca's grand-daughter give us the slip now, could we? Not without teaching her a lesson or two.'

Recovered slightly, Elissa looked up at the man again, taking in his repulsive grin and shining eyes. She forced a small smile onto her face.

'Help me up then' she said, raising her right hand to the man. His grin widened and he reached down to pull the girl up.

The darkness of the alley had covered the movement of her free hand as it carefully inched up her ankle, inside her thick woollen dress. Her fingers wrapped themselves around the handle of the knife that was strapped to her calf and, hidden by the upwards jerk as the man pulled her to her feet, slid the blade free of its sheath. Their eyes met, full of very different expectations for what the next few minutes would hold. His grin became an O of surprise at the first blow, then a grimace of pain as the knife went in the second time. By the sixth, it had gone slack and lost all ability to express what its owner had been thinking. Elissa took off her headscarf, its white stained now with red, and used it to wipe the worst of the blood from her hands.

* * * * *

The thick, iron-bound door slammed hard, rattling its wooden frame and shaking dust from the ceiling of the entrance hall of the ancient, crumbling castle.

'Grand-father?' Elissa shouted, rushing down the corridor. Ahead, the large meeting room with the fire-pit at its centre was almost dark, the fire long allowed to slide into embers. She turned back to the foot of a stone staircase and shouted upwards into the black beyond. A small, indistinct shuffling noise above told her that she had been heard by someone.

'You're awake' she stated as an old man with a thick white beard and wearing a simple woven robe and an eyepatch slowly made his way down the steps one at a time. Hannibal raised the brow over his good eye as he reached her.

'Could anyone sleep through that?' he demanded, grouchy. Elissa ignored his tone, instead taking him by the arm as he reached the foot of the staircase, leading him into the fire-pit room and sitting him down on a couch.

'They're coming' she said calmly, looking him full in the face. 'We need to follow the plan. Are you ready?'

Hannibal swallowed dryly and nodded in reply.

'How many?' he eventually managed to ask.

'Enough. One less than there were, but still enough. I'll gather the slaves. I came up the cliff path from the bay - the boat is still hidden down there.'

The old general sat still, showing no sign of urgency.

'Time to move, Grand-father!' Elissa insisted, taking his arm again. Hannibal shook her hand off.

'Who is it?' he asked.

'What does that matter? The Senate's errand boy. And it can't be good news.'

'Who did they send?'

She knew his stubbornness could turn this conversation into an hours-long standoff, until he eventually got his way. 'He gave his name as Titus Quinctius Flaminius' she conceded.

Hannibal gave a soft snort of recognition.

'Makes sense. Rome's big man in Greece. No doubt Prusias wet himself and gave me up as quickly as he could?'

Elissa considered what she had observed in the king of Bythia's throne room earlier that evening. 'He held out long enough to get something for his trouble. Now come on, old man!' she said, affecting jollity to hide her fear. She yanked her grandfather into a standing position. 'Is the escape bag still in its hiding place?'

Before Hannibal could reply, the iron-bound door rattled in its frame for a second time, the sound of five forceful and confident knocks of a fist on wood echoing down the hall towards them.

Hannibal's hand reached the door handle just ahead of their housekeeper's, a slave almost as old as the general himself and who had been with the Barca family for decades. Hannibal gestured his head towards the stairs and whispered instructions.

'Get yourself ready, Agathe. We will need to leave very soon.' She nodded and retreated.

He wrenched the door open quickly, giving the visitor his second surprise of the day.

'Titus!' he exclaimed expansively as if seeing a good friend for the first time in years. 'Come in, come in!'

The Roman senator stood dumbstruck for a moment, staring at the dishevelled half-blind old man in a nightgown before him. He stepped forwards into the corridor, flicking his hand towards two soldiers behind him to indicate that they should not follow. This tiny shadow of Hannibal Barca was no threat to anyone. Flamininus pushed back the uncomfortable memory that this was precisely what the other senators had argued when he had proposed his plan. Still, he was here now.

'I don't think we've met before, have we?' Hannibal continued, gently pushing his guest towards the fire-pit room.

'I don't think so, no' Flamininus replied, mildly amused. The Carthaginian general had been on the run from Rome for the past thirty years. If they had met, it would have been the Roman's duty to arrest him. 'We shared different ends of the battlefield at Thermopylae a few years back, I believe?' he added, referencing one of Hannibal's more recent jobs as military consultant to a minor eastern king. The old man gave the impression of thinking about this for a second then shook his head.

'Doesn't ring a bell. Make yourself as comfortable as you can. Fire's gone out I'm afraid' he said, indicating the couches that surrounded the ashy pit. Flamininus chose one and Hannibal seated himself opposite.

'What brings you to my middle-of-nowhere tumbledown castle in the dead of night?'

Flamininus had only been briefly wrongfooted by the wily old man's over-familiar welcome and answered slowly and deliberately.

'You, of course, General Barca.'

'I don't do public appearances any more' the Carthaginian countered, waving his formality away. 'Just "Hannibal" is fine. I'm very much retired.'

'Well, not quite retired enough, the Senate thinks. You've been selling your advice to Rome's enemies all over Asia, from what we can tell.'

Hannibal shrugged. 'Prusias is good enough to let me wither away here with a couple of slaves in my old age. If he asks occasional questions about military tactics, I indulge him. The poor boy's hardly a threat to the might of Rome though, surely?'

This was undeniable, but Flamininus was spared the difficult job of denying it by Elissa, who emerged from the shadows at the back of the room to stand at her grand-father's shoulder.

'What do you want, Roman?'

Flamininus looked at the rude girl flatly and then back to Hannibal.

'Your grand-daughter should learn to speak more respectfully. I've come to deliver you two messages, on the orders of the Senate.' These facts were true.

The general nodded and sat back expectantly with a grin, taking one of Elissa's hands in his.

'In need of a military consultant too, eh? I should warn you - I'm not cheap. And the elephants will be extra.'

The Roman was surprised at his own desire to smile too. He could see why this man had commanded such loyalty from his armies, through the toughest of times. He set his face sternly. 'The first is that you are designated as an enemy of the Republic and as such will be executed for your various acts of terrorism. As a mark of respect for your age, I will allow you to commit suicide and spare your household.' Partially true. The Senate had insisted on suicide, against Flaminius' tawdry suggestion of a show-trial and public execution.

Hannibal laughed out loud, even though Elissa's hand tightened in his grip. 'That's the good news is it? What's the second message? Perhaps you've come to tell me that you've discovered and liberated my fabled hidden treasure too?'

Flaminius tried to stop his face showing any hint of interest.

Elissa cut in. 'And what does Publius Scipio say about this? Not all Senators are afraid of tired old men - some treat them with the honour due to defeated enemies.'

Hannibal looked up at her sadly. 'Oh, Elissa. Scipio is dead. Why else do you think the Senate has agreed to let this man come here with his petty demands?'

'That is the second message' Flaminius confirmed. 'Scipio Africanus, hero of Zama, died two months ago.' This was true. The news of the famous general's death caused most of Rome to go into deep mourning. To Flaminius it spoke of opportunity.

Hannibal nodded sadly. 'Fourth greatest general this world has seen. Or perhaps the fifth.'

The Senator suppressed a smile again at the wizened man's invincible self-confidence.

'He received the greatest honours the city of Rome has to give' he said and paused, unsure whether to ask his next question. He knew he'd kick himself later if he didn't. It would leave his dinner party story without a killer ending. 'Tell me, General, because no one seems to know the answer, why was it that you didn't take the city when you had the chance?'

Hannibal nodded again, unsurprised.

'I wish I could remember' he said, trotting out the stock answer he always gave when asked about this by the curious or impertinent. Flamininus persisted, thinking flattery the answer.

'How many of our dead did you leave on the field at Cannae? Forty thousand?' he said, the awe at the scale of Rome's greatest defeat dripping from his voice.

'Closer to sixty' Hannibal casually interjected.

'And almost seventy Roman senators killed that day!' Flamininus said with reverence.

'Eighty-one, I believe. I counted their gold rings myself.'

'And yet - with the road to Rome undefended before you, you... did nothing. I don't understand.'

'No,' Hannibal said dryly. 'Your kind never does.'

Flamininus bristled at the insult and regretted trying to indulge this old fool. He returned to the matter in hand in an abrupt tone.

'Have it your way then, General. As I said, Scipio Africanus is dead and now you should prepare yourself to follow. I will give you the hour.'

Hannibal's voice became businesslike too. 'Please, Titus - at least allow me until dawn to say goodbye and write a few letters. I assume your men occupy the gatehouse? There's no way a man as ancient as I can get past that. You may as well get some sleep, I'll be just as dead when the sun comes up.'

Flamininus considered Hannibal's request, thinking of a way to accept without it looking like he'd conceded anything. He was bone-tired from a month of travelling and had had enough of the old man's games.

'My men will be coming through that door at first light' he said, pointing forcefully.

'Thank you. And what about my grand-daughter?' Hannibal asked, all humour long gone from his voice.

Flaminius looked briefly at Elissa again, his expression neutral. 'She killed my man when she fled the palace earlier. That cannot be ignored, I'm afraid.'

'She's sixteen' Hannibal said, disbelievingly.

The Roman thought about this fact. 'I could commute death to slavery,' he offered. 'If you save my men the trouble of a week's digging and tell me where you've hidden it'.

Hannibal's face dropped and he gripped his grand-daughter's hand ever more strongly. 'I'm sorry Elissa,' he said to her 'But I've got nothing I can use to buy this jackal off.' He turned back to Flaminius. 'We are in your hands, Senator.'

'So be it' he said and, rising from the couch, nodded very slightly at Hannibal and left.

The old man recovered his wits first, getting painfully to his feet. 'We go now, via the tunnels.' Elissa didn't move. 'Now, grand-daughter!' he barked out the order as if addressing a soldier in one of his armies. She looked at him in fear and he realised how scared she must be. He took her by the shoulders. 'It will be fine. The tunnels are a well-kept secret. We'll be across the straights before the sun is up and will disappear into Asia. If we can get to the Greek islands, perhaps there's hope there.' She nodded, reassured, but her mind was still miles away.

'What is it Elissa? Is there something else?'

A nagging thought would not leave her alone. 'Both the Romans I've met today called you a terrorist, not a soldier, grand-father. The stories you've told me... They're all about war, yes, but a *just* war...'

Hannibal grimaced. 'Terrorist, soldier, liberator - political distinctions, that's all. If we'd won, they'd be the terrorists. I was trying to free Italy, not enslave it. Sometimes it was necessary to do things that...' Elissa waited for her grand-father to conclude his thought. '...that I regret.'

'Such as?'

'Too many things to tell. It was war. That's all there is to say. Now go and fetch Agathe and Linus.'

Roused from her stunned state by mention of the two ancient slaves who had brought her up, Elissa hurried off to fetch them. Hannibal sighed and sat back down, staring wistfully at the last glowing traces of the fire, his mind jerked back decades by his grand-daughter's question, to a small town in central Italy, ten years into the war with Rome.

* * * * *

The stone felt rough yet warm as he gripped the parapet of the town wall and stared down at the miserable column of humanity filing through the gate below. A few men, many limping, were mixed in with the hundreds of emaciated women and children leaving their former lives with only the clothes they stood up in. Nuceria's stubbornness would have pushed any man's patience past breaking, Hannibal reasoned. But as the war had dragged on, his patience had been breaking more and more easily. Months of siege had finally led to bitter victory, with both sides at the point of collapse. The most recent letter from Carthage's leaders had been unequivocal about their expectations of progress in the war. His own men were hardly less demanding - it had taken every ounce of leadership Hannibal had in him to keep them from mutinying in the final days of the siege.

Nuceria guarded access to the fertile farmland of southern Italy beyond, food enough to keep his army fed through the winter that was coming. But he couldn't afford to leave the

town defended, or spare the men to occupy it. It was going to have to burn. And it's people... He needed to use them to send a message to any other town that thought resisting was a sensible idea.

To the general's right, one of the captured Nucerian senators coughed nervously, reminding him that he was not alone. 'What now?' he snapped, turning his head. The Italian, whose life to this point had not prepared him in the slightest for dealing with defeat, disrespect, or despair, stammered out an answer.

'We have your w-word, General? Safe conduct out of the city for our people?'

Hannibal grunted in reply. The politician, unsure of what that meant, pushed his point.

'Nuceria's senate are all your hostages now, the city is at your feet, General.'

Hannibal grunted again and gripped the parapet more tightly, returning his attention to the refugee column below. A boy, six years old at most he guessed, turned to look back at the walls. Seeing the general silhouetted above, he smiled and waved with the enthusiasm of a child with no idea of what was happening around him. Hannibal quickly looked away, up towards the horizon. The clear blue sky of a southern Italian autumn was streaked with smoke from the burning villages and farms for miles around.

Five minutes passed in silence before the two men were joined on the wall by an officer, distinguishable only by the plume on the helmet he wore. His appearance was otherwise as dishevelled and filthy as that of the fleeing citizens.

'That's the last of them, General.'

'Good. Close the gates and give the signal' Hannibal said. The officer waved his arm twice at some unseen comrade on the walls. Seconds later, trumpets blasted out short, sharp orders. The senator looked anxiously at Hannibal.

'What's happening?' he demanded, his previous deference forgotten. Hannibal didn't turn to address the man, keeping his gaze locked on the mass of humanity slowly moving away from the doomed town. 'What the hell is happening?' the senator repeated, his anxiety uncontrolled.

'Only what has to happen, nothing more' Hannibal said, as if this was a simple fact of life. Silence returned for a short time, before both men became aware of a distant but growing rumble. The clouds of dust that accompanied the noise removed any doubt - or hope - that the senator had. Horsemen, hundreds of them, no more than half a mile off and heading directly for the defenceless townsfolk.

'Your word -' the senator gulped, 'You gave your word!'

Hannibal finally looked at the man to answer. 'I promised safe conduct out of the city. Your people have had that.' His attention was wrenched back to the scene unfolding on the plain below by the first distant screams, shouts and rasping crunch of metal slicing into bone. The dust obscured from their eyes much of what was happening a few hundred yards away, but did nothing to prevent the terrible sounds of death and terror from reaching their ears as mounted soldiers hacked down the starved civilians.

Hannibal turned abruptly to the senator and issued his instruction.

'Have your colleagues assemble in the bath house.' The Nucerian goggled at his captor, unable to speak, before nodding dumbly and climbing down the ladder. The officer in the helmet went to follow, pausing when the General laid a hand on his shoulder.

'When they're all inside, nail the doors and windows shut and have the bath slaves keep the furnaces burning through the night.' If the soldier's mind recoiled at the image of thirty old men being slowly steamed to death, his face wasn't going to show it.

'At once, General' he confirmed, snapping a formal salute.

'Oh, and Gisgo -'

'Sir?'

'Offer to spare the first one of them that tells us where they buried their gold.'

Hannibal continued to look out over the plain, the screaming growing more distant and far less frequent as his cavalry ran down the last of the surviving townsfolk. Nasty work, he thought. But necessary.

* * * * *

The route leading to the tunnels was hidden in the castle's cellar and it took the strength of all four of them to prise up and then drag away the flagstone which covered the hole, a flickering lantern their only light.

'I'll go first' Elissa said and before anyone could object, she had lowered herself into the blackness below. She knew the layout by heart and was not disoriented by the darkness.

Five passages radiated out from the small chamber she had dropped into, each pointed in a different direction, giving the escaper plenty of options in case the enemy tried to surround the castle. Seconds later she was joined by Agathe, then her grandfather and finally by Linus, the man who had looked after Hannibal's personal needs since Spain almost forty years ago. Elissa watched as the three of them recovered their breath and waited for her next instruction, struck by how ridiculous the whole idea was, leading these three ancients in an escape attempt that would need the fitness and speed of the young and the strong.

'Wait here,' she ordered, 'I'll check the coast is clear'. None of her elderly escapees had the breath to disagree, and Elissa set off down the central tunnel in a low, hunched run. The passage was only three years old - she'd taken part in the digging herself - and her left hand traced the familiar contours of the wall, removing the need for a light to see by. Less than a

minute brought her close to the tunnel's exit and she slowed down to silence her steps. A soft glow ahead showed the dim light of the night pushing through the thorn bush - a nice touch, she'd thought at the time - that grew thickly across the entrance and made it impossible to spot from the path. Elissa let her breathing slow and stood in silence, straining her ears for the second time that night for any sound. The tunnel opened onto the cliff path above the bay where she had left the boat an hour before. She edged closer, her hand almost touching the thorns that concealed her. It was then that she heard it: nothing very much, just the subtle clink of metal on metal. The shifting of weight from one foot to the other of a man in armour. The thinnest trace of a whispered 'Quiet there!' floated into the passage and then was gone, leaving Elissa wondering if she had heard it at all. She inched her way backwards down the tunnel with infinite care.

'No good,' she said softly to Hannibal, who had sat himself down on the dusty, earthen floor of the entrance chamber. 'At least two soldiers at the exit.'

Hannibal's eyes gleamed in the lantern light. 'By chance?' he asked.

'Not likely - they were waiting in silence right next to the thorn bush. It was pure luck that I heard them.'

The old man considered the matter and chewed his cheek, but said nothing else.

'I'm going to try Three' Elissa said after a few seconds, pointing past his shoulder. 'It comes up at the foot of the east wall, and we might be able to sneak round that way to the bay.'

Hannibal looked up for a second and nodded at his grand-daughter, who quickly disappeared down another of the tunnels, hand tracing the wall's shape again.

Barely three minutes passed before she was back, the expression on her face one of anguish. 'Men there too. Three, I think. Hard to tell.'

Hannibal nodded several times and he reached his conclusions.

'Four comes up in the gatehouse kitchen, so that's no good,' she said to herself. 'I'll go and check One, the exit is on the far side of where we need to get to but - '

Hannibal's hand gripped Elissa's arm weakly, restraining her. 'Don't trouble yourself, grand-daughter. There will be silent soldiers guarding that one too.'

'You can't know that!' she hissed angrily, shocked at his apparent surrender. Hannibal took his grand-daughter's face gently in his hands and spoke calmly.

'Who knows about these tunnels, Elissa?'

She twisted out of his reach in irritation. 'No one but the four of us - you know that! And the engineer, but he's back in Greece with his men.'

'And yet armed men are patiently waiting for us to emerge from this best-kept of secrets.

That would suggest it isn't the secret we thought it was.' Elissa did not know what to say to this, so shrugged. Hannibal let his hands drop back into his lap.

'Perhaps our tunnelling expert sold his knowledge to Prusias before he left' he speculated.

'Who knows? It doesn't matter now.'

'So, what are you saying? That's it, we just wait to get hauled out of this hole by our ears when the sun comes up?'

Hannibal ignored the question for the moment. 'Listen Elissa -' he began. Her eyes were unfocussed and welling with tears. 'Listen' he intoned firmly, his manner forcing her to look up. 'You might not remember staying at Xander's villa on Kos. You were very young.'

She was confused, but defiant. 'I remember, but -'

'And do you remember what I left there?'

'The statues in the garden?' Her voice was full of uncertainty. Why was he asking her this nonsense about those two ugly Cretan copies, so cheap that he'd given them away? She didn't have to wait long to find out.

'They're hollow. And filled with gold' he answered factually. 'Enough for several lifetimes, if they're still there.'

Elissa sat down heavily next to her grand-father, as if physically weighed down by the last of his secrets.

'What now? We can't just sit here and wait for the end'. Those statues filled with gold might as well be on the moon, for all the good they could do them here.

'There's the fifth tunnel' he replied, inclining his head towards the final, black opening. 'That's the only one they cannot guard'.

'And for good reason! It lets out directly into the cliff face' she said with rising exasperation.

Those people who call him a genius never had to live with him.

'Which is why we put the rope there, grand-daughter.'

She felt a strong urge to scream at the old man.

'The rope? The rope? You're suggesting I lower the three of you ancients one at a time, eighty feet down to the sea as it crashes against the rocks, where you all - presumably - tread water while waiting for me to follow? After which we swim a quarter mile to the boat?'

Hannibal smiled and shook his head in amusement.

'No. That's too bold a plan, even by my standards' he said with patience. 'I'm suggesting that you go alone.'

* * * * *

Flamininus' fist paused in the very act of rapping on the castle door, as it swung inwardly open. Linus and Agathe stood silently in the corridor, gaunt and red-eyed.

'Well?' the Roman demanded, 'Take me to your master. The sun is up and so's his time'. The two old Greek slaves turned and trudged down the corridor, Flamininus and two of his men striding behind and forcing the pace.

Once they reached the cellar, Linus gestured at the hole in the floor and the Roman craned forwards to see into the blackness.

'The lantern, man, the lantern!' He snapped his fingers and one of the soldiers darted forward with a light. There below, laid out on his back, was the small and puny body of Rome's greatest terror. Hannibal's remaining eye still stared, bulging in its socket and his neck bore the crimson burn of a rope.

'Strangulation?' Flamininus demanded of Linus. The slave nodded. 'By you?' The Greek nodded again and looked away.

'A coward's death.' Flamininus pronounced. 'Now take me to the girl.'

It was Agathe who dared to speak. 'She's gone, my lord.'

'Gone?' he repeated in disbelief, voice rising. 'Gone? Gone where?'

The old Greek woman stepped backwards in fear. Linus spoke up.

'Down the cliff, my lord, that's all we know.'

His mouth dropped open at this revelation. *Gods damn that obnoxious brat!* He had been relying on torturing the answer out of the girl, something his colleagues in the Senate had carefully and explicitly forbidden him from doing to Hannibal. He had argued long and hard before they agreed he could hunt the old man down. And he had pushed his luck with the suggestion that a fortune in stolen gold could be recovered. Returning to the city empty-handed would mean the end of his senatorial career.

Flamininus turned and sprinted up the steps two at a time. Perhaps there was time to catch her before she reached the far shore. He burst out of the castle and onto the hillside overlooking the narrow gulf separating Bithynia from the rest of Asia. He fell to his knees at the cliff's edge and frantically scanned the sea below. The early morning sun danced mockingly on the deep blue water, inviting him to join it. The gulf was dotted with tiny boats -

as far as his eyes could see, more than he could keep count of, and headed in as many directions.

* * * * *

Hannibal Barca brought terror into the heart of Rome through his feats of daring subterfuge and his genius on the battlefield. Having marched his army (including several war elephants) over the Alps and into Italy, he proceeded to defeat every army Rome could throw at him but was never able to turn tactical advantage into a lasting victory. Hannibal was finally defeated by Scipio Africanus and allowed to retreat temporarily into obscurity. Many citizens of the Republic would have despised him for the countless atrocities of his long war with Rome. And some saw even in an ageing and powerless Hannibal the chance to make their fame and fortune. Both [Plutarch](#) and [Livy](#) give (slightly differing) accounts of the small death of this once-great man, a grubby episode of which honourable Romans seemed to have been ashamed.

This story is extracted from the forthcoming collection 'Six Nasty, Brutish and Short Stories from Ancient Rome' by Ed McWatt. Find out more at www.edmcwatt.com