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Omnibus IV Primary Section C

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Food is running scare here in Hannibal’s camp. I cannot understand it – Carthaginian loyalty is much different than our Roman loyalty. I am tied to Rome by loyalty, and I will die for her as a spy here in Hannibal’s encampment. But these soldiers of Carthage seem ready to die or fight; to desert or to follow Hannibal to the end of the world. They are brave men, yet unpredictable. I fear the fight that comes. But if I were to choose one man to follow to the world’s end, it would be Hannibal. He has led his men over mountains, over rivers, valleys, leading them against our bravest generals and emerging the victor each and every time. I fear for Varro; he is bold and brash, like many of our generals, and I cannot imagine how he will triumph over one such as Hannibal. Roman courage and roman loyalty are no match for Carthaginian dedication to Hannibal.

As I roam the camps, trying to remove the edge from my hunger, while keeping a sharp edge on my knife, I mingle with the soldiers, and hear stories, true stories, of Hannibal. His spies are everywhere, but – thank the gods! – they are just as hungry as I and do not venture often from their tents. Others roam Varro’s camp, and Hannibal knows as much about Varro as he does about himself.

There is not much chance of comfort in this camp. These Carthage-bred soldiers foster great love for a chosen few, but not for a stranger in their camp. As I pose as a Spaniard my ties are stretched thin and sparse, seeing that the Spanish allies are threatening to leave. If Hannibal plans to make a move, he must move now. Winter will not last forever, and when Spring breaks the Spanish will tolerate starvation no longer. If Varro can but be told to hold back a little longer, the Spanish will flock to Rome and Hannibal’s troops will be on the brink of death.

Ah Abudantia, grant me strength to endure, grant me food, be it scraps from the trough of Hannibal’s horse! Favor with Hannibal is hard to gain and it is now I need it most. I *must* gain favor with Hannibal that he might grant to me his plans. I am unable to conceive any idea to wheedle my way into his counsel, for hunger gnaws at my stomach and finds its way into my heart and from there to my mind. What plots do the gods weave to so unite my pains and spread them throughout all my senses? I cannot think, for I cannot eat to fuel my thought. Ah well, I must do something to pass the time; something to initiate or activate some thought.

I walk out of my shared scrap of canvas that serves as a dwelling. Things look desperate. There are men everywhere, some dead, most living, but all starving. I must get out. I must tell Varro of this. But am I how to get out? I do not know Varro’s plan; he may attack at any time. And if he attacks, I will be caught like a fish in a net, like Venus and Mars caught by Vulcan[[1]](#footnote-1). Yet if I leave now I will return without the information I am required to bring.

Even the higher-ranked officers are beginning to humble themselves and scavenge for food now… the others have given up long ago. My last scraps of bread are gone…

[here the writing breaks into unintelligible gibberish, likely ranting on the need for provisions. The writing resumes…]

…even food rejected by horses is being fought over by the soldiers. I try to shoulder my way into the crowd near the trough. I am shoved aside and given dark looks from Carthaginians. I suspect they do not think too highly of giving their last bites of food to a Spaniard. If they were to know I am a spy I would surely be torn to bits. One soldier has tasted his sword blade; he does not find it too repulsive. Carthaginian Brutes!

Wearied, tired, bloodied, mud-spattered, I stumble through the camps. Biting winter cold has no effect on a face with dirt already frozen across it. I see the grapes[[2]](#footnote-2) clustered in the wintery sky, if they would but dip to earth that I might partake.

As I gaze upward I stumble, not a new occurrence to a tired body – but this time I have tripped over something. I look at my feet – it is a man, a dead man. But he is an officer. I glance around; there is no one in sight, for if they are not fighting for food they sleep to escape the pains of hunger. Stripping the man of his uniform, I take up his garments. Hannibal’s tent is just ahead. May the gods help me now! There is parchment in the man’s pocket – it is Hannibal’s plan of attack, in some form, at least. But it is not enough; I scan the parchment and set my footsteps to Hannibal’s tent. As I am escorted in, I note the lack of light, and am grateful. It would not do for Hannibal to notice his officer had changed. There he is – the great general, who has defeated so many that Rome sends against him. His curved eyebrows narrow pointedly as the eyes below them focus on me. I shift nervously. A cruel smile spreads across his face.

“Have you changed your mind, then?” He asks. I can only nod dumbly in the presence of such a great general.

He is like a great lion that plays with a mouse. I sense that he knows I am no captain; and no Spaniard either. He knows I am a Roman, and a Roman spy. He motions to a man standing in the shadows behind him.

“Very Well. Maro will give you the details about the decoy force you are to lead.”

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I stand on the hill now, taunting the Roman army – ah, the absurdity of it - with my token force. Hannibal knows, and he is sending me to death at the hands of my own friends. In the distance brash Minucius sights us. He calls out threats. Drawing his sword he and his men charge their horses. I loosen the stiff Carthaginian sword from its sheath. Nerving my parched lips to speak, I whisper the command. ‘Charge.’ The Carthaginians need no greater bidding. They charge and yell battle cries. They are invincible, even with a lack of food. An evil smile pulls on the corners of Minucius’s lips. We are three men apart. Minucius hacks down a Carthaginian cavalry men, and pulls on the reins. Two men apart. A burly Carthaginian smashes down the Roman cavalry who faces me. One man apart. Minucius thrusts him aside. We face each other, and look into each other’s eyes. His eyes lock on mine, and he swings his sword as he thrusts aside my horse’s head. Fire burns in his eyes. I am dying at the hand of my friend. The sword bites my chest; I am hurled to the ground. Minucius dismounts and stands over me. Out from a starving stomach, a parched throat, and a wounded heart I gasp my last words.

“Minucius!” He looks at me; recognition dawns.

He drops to his knees, cradling my head in his hands.

“Narius!” he sobs. “The gods are too cruel!”

I write my last words, now, on this parchment, and hand it to Minucius. He will pass it on. He will pass on my story. My story, which is drawing to an end.

1. The roman version of the story of Aphrodite and Ares being caught by Hephaestus [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. The ‘Bunch of Grapes’ is one of the Roman names for the Pleiades [↑](#footnote-ref-2)