Hamilcar’s ascendancy, with his kinsmen and political supporters, was more or less established by the beginning of 237. Public feeling favoured him all the more because his projects for Sardinia and Spain were plainly intended for Carthage’s recovery. The troops were available. There was the garrison at Carthage, for example, most of it now hardly necessary to protect the city. Before and after the winter, fresh mercenaries too would be arriving at Carthage, as surmised earlier, looking for employment or having been promised it. Hamilcar and Hanno themselves would have had no continuing need of up to 30,000 men once Libya began to submit, so apart from some troops perhaps being sent ahead to intimidate Utica and Hippacra, others could have headed for Carthage to prepare for a move overseas. Finally, new conscripts could (with due caution) be levied from the penitent Libyans, not only as military manpower but likewise as useful guarantees of their home towns’ future good behaviour. Properly treated, these troops would become first-class soldiery, as Hamilcar’s son was to demonstrate in his campaigns far from both Spain and Africa.

How the state planned to pay for all these activities can only be surmised. Through all the hardships and setbacks, the republic had managed, as shown earlier, to meet essential costs. The treasury in March 237 held 1,200 talents at least, for soon afterwards it was unexpectedly forced to pay this sum (equivalent to 7,200,000 Greek drachmas) to the Romans. In fact it probably held more, because the sudden outflow of funds did not stop Hamilcar from setting out as planned, with army and fleet, for Spain. But revenues had to be restored urgently. Plunder, fines and selling prisoners into slavery would bring in some immediate funds. Then, as trade recovered, so would customs revenues. In pacifying Libya, Hamilcar and Hanno might forego terror against defeated enemies but a certain amount of punitive exactions, like confiscations and fines, can be inferred. No doubt regular taxes, too, were soon reimposed.

A sensible balance needed to be struck. Having financed the rebel war-effort, from the early enthusiasm of contributions on to the con-
continuous needs of the armies, and suffered the effects of three years of campaigns over much of the countryside, Libyan communities must now have been in severe difficulties, many all but destitute. Fines and confiscations would add to their troubles. Therefore savage punishments and harsh new taxation—the kind which had set the Libyans on the road to rebellion—would simply perpetuate bitterness and make pro-Carthaginian régimes unstable, an outcome no intelligent Carthaginian leader wanted. Hamilcar and Hanno, or Carthaginian officials sent out afterwards to finalise details, needed to apply both judgement and tact in restoring relations between the city and its subjects. The Libyans’ loyalty a generation later, in the difficult years of the Second Punic War, is a reasonable indicator that the Carthaginians did achieve essentially the right settlement.

These processes for creating stability at home and new opportunities abroad were overtaken by troubling news. The Romans had decided to accept a plea for help made by the mutineers expelled from Sardinia. They were now readying a force of their own to sail to the island.¹

The news was probably brought by merchants arriving from Italy. Polybius clearly indicates that the Carthaginians then sent a protest: ‘the Carthaginians were angry, on the ground that rule over Sardinia belonged instead to them, and they made preparations to hunt down those who had removed the island from them.’ This second item must be loosely expressed; for there could be no question of sending an expedition against the mutineers in Italy. An expedition made sense only for recovering Sardinia. Since the native Sardinians had plainly not invited the Carthaginians back, from the latter’s viewpoint they were equally in revolt. They were, in fact, the people whom the Carthaginians meant to ‘hunt down’—in other words, punish—and four or five lines later Polybius himself makes it clear that the expedition was ‘against the Sardinians’.

The response from Rome was staggering. ‘Taking hold of this pretext, the Romans voted war against the Carthaginians, saying they were making their preparations not against the Sardinians, but against them [i.e., against the Romans].’ This war-vote, a formal declaration as Polybius shows in a later book, they then ‘announced’ to the Carthaginians, evidently via a Roman embassy. Not only was war declared out of the blue, but it could be carried out: the Roman preparations for taking