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God of War

Written by Christian Cameron

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ALEXANDER GOD OF WAR

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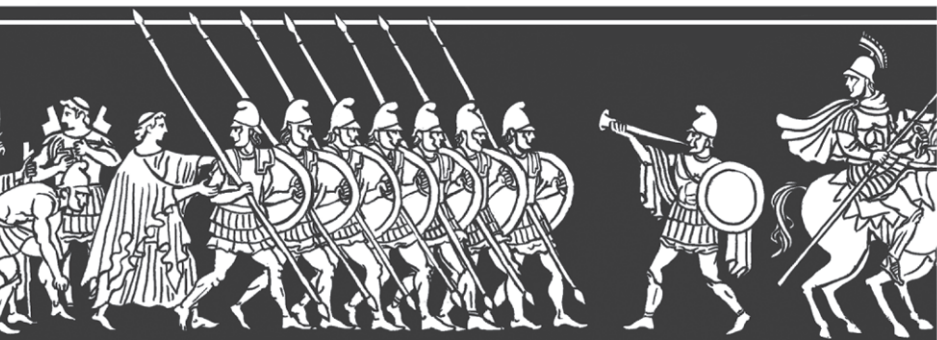
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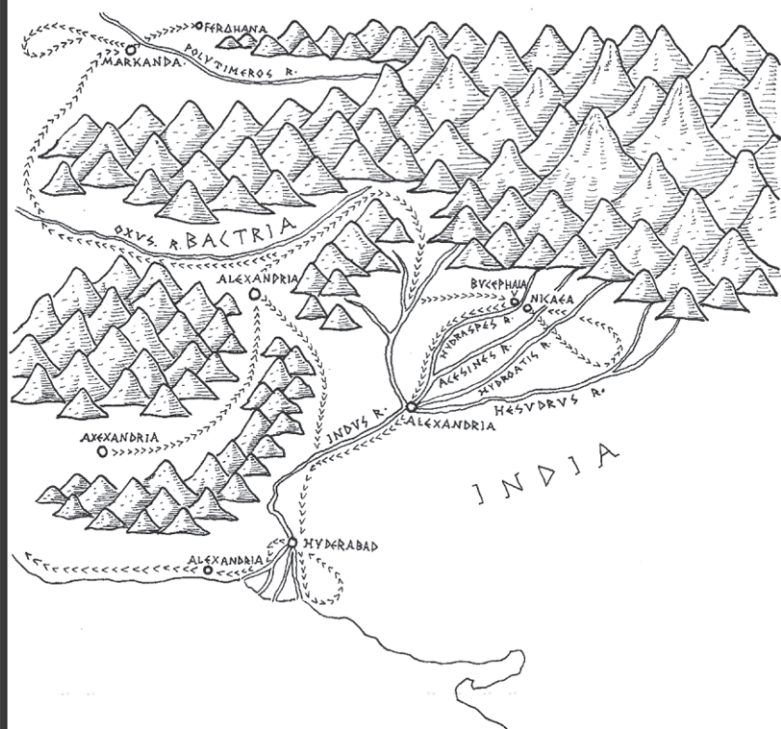
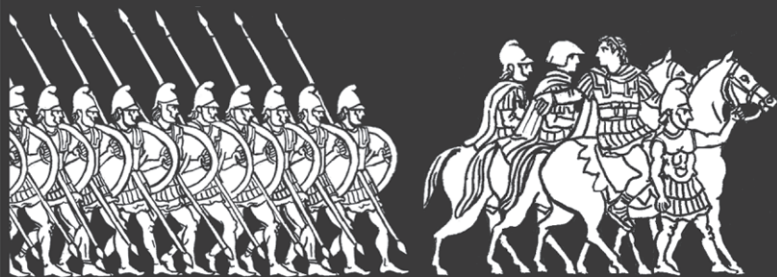
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·EMPIRE OF ALEXANDER·

○ ... CITY
X ... BATTLE
— ... PASS
— ... ROUTE





PART I

The Garden of Midas

PROLOGUE



Satyrus had been in Alexandria only a few days when Leon took him to the Royal Palace to meet the King of Aegypt. After Antigonos and Eumenes and four months with a mercenary army, Satyrus should not have been nervous, but he was – Ptolemy was the greatest king in the circle of the earth, and his court kept great state, as befitted the ruler of a land that had recorded history going back five thousand years into the past, whose ancient gods still held sway over most of the Nile valley.

Ptolemy wore the crown of Lower Aegypt on his head, and a strange, un-Greek cowl that went with it, over a chiton of pure Tyrian purple. His sandals were white and gold. In his hand was the ankh – the sceptre of Aegypt. Leon's hundreds of parental admonishments fled – Satyrus could scarcely remember how to bow.

The great king of all Aegypt leaned forward on his ivory throne. 'Kineas's son?' he asked Leon.

'Yes, great king,' Leon answered.

'Has the look. The nose. The chin. The arrogance.' Ptolemy smiled at the boy. 'I'm sorry for your loss, lad.'

Satyrus found his voice. 'She's not dead!' he insisted. The loss of his mother had affected him more than even his sister. Rumour had her murdered on the banks of the Tanais river, but it was still possible that rumour was wrong.

Ptolemy smiled a sad smile. 'Will you stay at my court, lad? Until you grow a little? And I'll put a good sword in your hand and send you out to reclaim your own.'

Satyrus bowed. 'I will serve you, lord, even as my uncles Diodorus and Leon serve you.'

Gabius, the king's intelligencer, brought a stool and sent most of the courtiers out. And he and the king asked Satyrus questions – hundreds of questions – about Antigonos and about how Eumenes died, about the mountains south of Heraklea and about the coast of the Euxine

– on and on, battles and deserts and everything Satyrus had seen in his busy young life.

But he was served rich cheese and pomegranate juice and crisp bread with honey. And neither the king nor the intelligencer was rude, or forceful. Merely thorough.

Sometimes Leon had to answer, or had to coax the answer from his ward, but Satyrus had lived with soldiers for two campaigns, and he knew what was expected of him. He explained as best he could the source of Antigonus's elephants, the horse breeds of the steppe and a hundred other details, while a dozen Aegyptian priests and a pair of Greek scholars wrote his words down on papyrus.

When they were done, the king leaned forward again, and put a gold ring into the boy's hand – a snake with his tail in his own mouth.

'This is the sign of my people – my secret household,' Ptolemy said. 'Wear it in good health. And whenever you need me – well, your uncle knows how to find me. You are a remarkable young man – your father's son. Is there anything I can do for you?'

Leon shook his head.

But Satyrus couldn't restrain himself. 'You knew ... Alexander?' he asked.

Ptolemy sat up as if a spark from the fire had struck bare skin. But he grinned. 'Aye, lad. I knew Alexander.'

'Would you ... tell me what he was like?' The boy stepped forward, and the guards by the throne rustled, but Ptolemy put out a hand.

The King of Aegypt rose, and every officer left in the great hall froze.

'Come with me, boy,' he said.

Together, the King of Aegypt and the adolescent boy walked out of the great hall of the palace. A dozen bodyguards fell in behind them. Leon and Gabias came with them, bringing up the rear of a fast-moving column that crossed the palace in deserted corridors or past scurrying slaves.

They entered a tunnel behind the royal residence. Ptolemy was silent, so Satyrus did his best not to ask questions. The one look he'd caught from Leon told him that his guardian was angry.

They climbed steps from the tunnel into a sombre hall, almost as big as the throne room. The walls were of red stone, lit by the last light of the sun through a round hole in the middle of the low dome above them.

The hole of the dome was covered in crystal or glass. Satyrus stared like a peasant.

In the midst of the hall was a dais as tall as a grown man's knees, and on it was a bier – a closed sarcophagus in solid gold, with chiselled features and ram's horns in ivory.

Satyrus fell on his knees. ‘Alexander,’ he said.

The King of Aegypt went to the bier and opened a cabinet set in the side of the dais. There were twenty-four holes – neat boxes made of cedar with silver nails. They held scrolls.

‘I kept a military journal, from our first campaign together to our last,’ Ptolemy said. He took one of the scrolls – the first – from its box, and handed it to Satyrus. Satyrus opened it, still on his knees. In the first hand’s-breadth of parchment, he saw water marks, mud, a grass stain, and a bloody handprint.

Satyrus wanted to raise the parchment to his lips – his awe was religious.

‘Of course,’ Ptolemy said with the impish grin of a much younger man, ‘it’s a tissue of lies.’

Gabias laughed. Leon smiled. Satyrus felt his stomach fall.

‘He was like a god, but he was the vainest man who ever walked the bowl of the earth and he couldn’t abide a word of criticism after the first few years.’ Ptolemy shrugged. ‘I loved him. I know what love is, youngster, and I don’t toss that word around. He was like a god. But he’d have had me killed if I had written everything just as it happened. The way he killed most of his friends.’

Satyrus swallowed with difficulty.

‘Would you really like me to tell you about Alexander?’ Ptolemy asked. ‘I will. I’ve always meant to put down a private memoir for the library, when it is finished. So that some day someone will have the real story.’ He looked at Satyrus. ‘Or would you rather I kept it between me and the scribes, lad? It’s not always a pretty story. On the other hand, if you plan to be a king, there’s a lesson in it you must learn.’

Satyrus looked at Leon, but the Nubian’s face was carefully blank.

‘Yes,’ Satyrus said. ‘Yes, I would like you to tell me about Alexander.’

Ptolemy nodded. He smiled with half his mouth, and then he took the crown of Lower Aegypt from his head and handed it to a guard, handed another the sceptre, slipped the cowl over his head. Satyrus noticed that the King of Aegypt’s left hand was badly scarred, two of the fingers almost fused, but he seemed to use it well enough. He also noticed that the great King of Aegypt had a dagger on a thong around his neck. Satyrus had one, too.

When he was done taking off the regalia, Ptolemy sat down in the red light of sunset on the steps of the dais. Alexander’s sarcophagus lay above him, the figure of the god-man himself reclining over his head, lit too brilliantly for mortal eyes to see by the last rays of the sun on his chryselephantine face.

Gabias leaned forward. 'My lord, Cassander's envoy has waited all day.'

Ptolemy put an elbow comfortably into the relief of the dais, where a young Alexander was putting a spear into a lion. 'Let 'em wait. I need this.' He looked at Satyrus. 'I doubt I can do this in a day, lad. So you'll have to come back, now and then.'

'I will,' said Satyrus. The sunset on Alexander's head was blinding him – he had to look away.

'Well, then,' Ptolemy began ...

ONE



Macedon, 344–342 BC

It's not my earliest memory of him – we grew up together – but it's the beginning of this story, I think.

There were three of us – we must have been nine or ten years old. We'd been playing soldiers – pretty much all we ever did, I think. Black Cleitus – my favourite among the pages, with curly black Thracian hair and a wicked smile – had a bruise where Alexander had hit him too hard, which was par for the course, because Cleitus would never hit back, or never hit back as hard as the prince deserved. Mind you, he often took it out on me.

No idea where Hephaestion was. He and Alexander were usually inseparable, but he may have been home for his name day, or going to temple – who knows?

We were in the palace, in Pella. Lying on the prince's bed, with our wooden swords still in our hands.

There was a commotion in the courtyard, and we ran to the exedra and looked down to see the king and his companions ride in – just his closest bodyguard, his somatophylakes. They were wearing a fortune in armour – brilliant horsehair plumes, Aegyptian ostrich feathers, solid gold eagle's wings, panther skins, leopard skins, bronze armour polished like the disc of the sun and decorated in silver and gold, tin-plated bronze buckles and solid silver buckles in their horse tack, crimson leather strapping on every mount, tall Persian bloodstock horses with pale coats and dark legs and faces. Philip was not the richest or the best armoured – but no one could doubt that he was in command.

It only took them a moment to dismount, and a horde of slaves descended on them and took their armour and their horses and brought them hot clothes and towels.

That was dull for us, so we went back to Alexander's room. But we had seen a dream of power and glory. We were quiet for a long time.

Cleitus scratched – he was always dirty. ‘Let’s play knucklebones,’ he said. ‘Or Polis.’

But Alexander was still looking towards the courtyard. ‘Some day they’ll be dead,’ he said. ‘And we’ll do what they do.’

I grinned at him. ‘But better,’ I said.

He lit up like a parchment lamp at a festival. He hugged me to him. ‘That’s right,’ he said. ‘But better.’

It’s odd, because that same day – at least in my memory – is the day that we heard Philip ordain the invasion of Asia and the war with Persia.

We must have been invited to the great hall. We weren’t old enough to be pages, yet, and we never went near the hall once the drinking started. So I’m going to guess that it was Alexander’s birthday, or just possibly the Feast of Herakles, the great one we celebrate in Macedon. I had lain on a couch to eat, with my pater at home, and I had been served by slaves, because my family was quite rich. But I had never seen the reckless rout for Philip’s soldiers, courtiers and minions. I lay on a couch with Prince Alexander, pretending to be as adult as I could, trying to be bigger and fiercer and taller and stronger.

After dinner, Philip, who was lying with his general, Parmenio, and a dozen other officers in a circle just to my right, began to carp at Parmenio about how long it was taking him to defeat Phokion and the Athenians, and Parmenio, who was a friend of my father’s and my hero, shot back that if Athens didn’t have free entry into the Persian ports . . .

Antipater – quite a young man at the time, and already the schemer of the staff – sat up suddenly on his couch. ‘To the war in Persia, and the end of Athens!’ he said, and poured wine on the floor. ‘I send these winged words to the gods.’

We had a dozen Athenians among us – mercenary officers, gentlemen rankers, courtiers, philosophers and a pair of ‘representatives’ from the ‘democracy’. Philip laughed aloud. ‘If I took Persia,’ he said, ‘I would *be* a god.’

At my side, Alexander, who sought, even at age ten, to be in all things the first and best, stiffened and raised himself on his elbows. I caught his eye.

‘We’ll miss it!’ he hissed.

‘No we won’t,’ I said with the total bravado of the very young. ‘No we won’t.’

And later that year, or perhaps the next – just before I became a royal page – Alexander came to one of our farms. We were among the first families in Macedon, and our wealth was old wealth – we had horses

and land. Our stud farms were the best in Macedon, and perhaps the best in Hellas – my father imported stock from Thrace and Asia and even, once, a mare from Italia, and our horses were bred for war – big, tall, perhaps a trifle bony and heavy-faced for the purist, but tough, capable of carrying a man in armour and capable of surviving the Tartarus of horses, a summer on campaign. For that, a horse needs hard hooves – hard enough to stay hard in four days of rain, and hard enough to stay strong over roads that men have worn down to shards of sharp rock. A war horse has to be able to stay alive on the leavings of grass where a thousand horses have already grazed; has to survive a day in the sun without water, if its rider's life depends on it. And it is a rare horse that can do all these things.

But we bred them, and it was my pater's life. He was the old kind of aristocrat, the kind of man who hated the court and never left his own farms if he could help it. I won't say everyone loved him, because he was a very difficult man when crossed, but he was fair, and fairness is all peasants and slaves ask of a master. They don't love us, anyway – but they ought to be able to expect the same treatment and the same justice every day.

At any rate, Pater promoted and freed his slaves and made sure his freemen ended up on farms of their own if they did well for him, and that did as much for our horses as all our priceless bloodstock. Listen – let me tell you a story. It's about Alexander, in a way.

Years after this, I was in Athens – you'll get to that part later – and I went shopping for vases. I wanted to send something to my father and to other friends, and the ceramics of Athens are the finest in the world.

In the Keramaki – the ceramics quarter – were two shops next to each other. Both had big names, and both provided the sort of high-end wares I wanted – one specialised in scenes of gods and war, while the other specialised in scenes from plays.

Outside the latter, a man in a dun wool cloak was beating a slave with a stick. He was thorough and brutal. I passed that shop – interrupting a man beating his slave is like interrupting a man having sex with his wife. I went into the other shop, where two slaves behind the counter were burnishing the surfaces of finished pots with bone tools. Both were older men, clearly experienced, and they were chatting, laughing. At my entry, the nearer jumped up with a smile while the other continued burnishing. I watched him for a while, his quick, even strokes, and when I looked at a wine krater, I couldn't find a spot that had been left unburnished. The surfaces were perfect – almost glossy.

I didn't want scenes from plays, but I loved the sheer quality of the finishes.

Later, after a cup of wine with the master, I went back to the first shop, where the beaten slave, who proved to be the master painter, sat slumped in a corner. The master waited on me himself. His vases were fine, but the finishes were all sloppy.

He saw me looking at the surface. He grimaced. ‘You can’t get good slaves any more,’ he said, and shrugged.

I bought six vases, and all of them had scenes from Athenian drama. One is buried with my father. He loved it that much. In part, I gave it to him because he would have agreed. You can’t *buy* a good slave, but you can make him good with fair treatment, and in return, he’ll burnish the pot evenly. Understand me, boy?

But I digress.

Alexander came to our farm at Tyrissa, and stayed a week, riding our best horses and watching the running of a great estate with interest. He was not a farm boy by any means – I had been in the fields as soon as I could walk, because in Macedon, lords pick flax with peasants, and at haying, everyone gathers hay. Everyone but Prince Alexander, of course.

But he loved it. We sacrificed to Poseidon every day (every horse farm has a shrine to the Horse God) and we rode, fed horses, mucked out stalls, and watched grooms and pages schooling the next year’s cavalry mounts. On this one farm, with eighty slaves and six hundred head of horses, we provided almost a tenth of all the cavalry remounts that Philip demanded every year, because war eats horses far faster than it eats men. In one season chasing Phokion around the Dardanelles, King Philip lost two thousand horses to bad food, disease and exhaustion – and we had to find new ones. In a bad year, the three-year-olds intended to be the next year’s cavalry horses are sent out early, green and nervous and flighty. An epidemic or a military disaster could force a farm to use up its stock – the superb horses used for breeding – sent as cavalry horses, and lost for ever. Two straight bad seasons could wreck a farm. Three straight bad seasons could wreck a nation, leaving it without cavalry. Waves of disease – the arrows of Apollo – or bad water, or a long heatwave – and messengers arrived at our farms with letters from the king demanding horses.

I mention this not because Alexander’s visit had any long-term effect on his life, but because we are horse soldiers, and we loved horses. And used them and used them up. I have had three great horses, and Alexander had one – and my Poseidon was the best horse I’ve ever had between my legs. But great horses are as rare as great men, and as fragile, and need the care and attention that other men lavish on a lover or a best friend.

The last day Alexander was on our farm, we built a fort of grape

stakes, and with a few of my friends, we challenged the Thracian boys – the children of our slaves – to come and take it from us.

There were twenty of them, and they hooted at us, unafraid as slave children are until they are beaten. They came at us without fear, with rocks and sticks, and we stood our ground with the same weapons, except that Alexander and I had small round shields made of wicker which we'd woven ourselves from old vines.

They attacked twice and we drove them off with some blood flowing, and then we looked out over the fields, with herds of beautiful horses in every field, and fences of woven hurdle between the herds.

'Why are they separated?' Alexander asked me.

I shrugged. 'We have a mare from Arabia in that field, and we're putting her with one of our best stallions – Big Ares, over there. He doesn't think much of her yet,' I said ruefully, because the stallion was at the far end of the field, ignoring the mare.

'And over there?' Alexander asked.

'Pericles's herd. The grey is Pericles – an old stallion, but still one of the best, with a healthy dose of Nisean in him from Persia.'

'And nearer?' he asked. He was clearly impressed with my knowledge. 'They're all different – large and small. Bay and black and white and piebald.'

'Socrates, my father's favourite. That field has a special purpose.' I smiled. 'It is a secret. Pater is breeding horses that are smart. Only smart horses go into that field.'

Alexander nodded. 'I'm to have a tutor,' he said. 'To help me learn to rule men. And yet your horse farm seems to teach all the lessons I need.'

Later that afternoon, the Thracian children came for us again. But we were ready, and we beat them again, and then we chased them – a dozen of us.

I kissed my pater the next day, because I was going to court to be a page, and Alexander was taking me as a companion. We both knew I was in for a long, tough time. But I thought I wanted it, and he was a fine enough father to let me go. He gave me a fine ring, and a bag of money. I guess he'd been a young man, once.

I rode off, excited to be with my prince, excited to be going full-time to court, excited to be a royal page.

I only went back to the farms to live just once, and that was much later, in virtual exile, as you'll hear. I never thought, that bright sunny morning, that I was giving up horses and love and friendship and beautiful mornings to spend the rest of my youth avoiding rape and murder while working like a slave.

A royal page.