Tyrant

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Extract

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The sky above the dust was blue. In the distance, far out over the plain, mountains rose in purple and lavender, the most distant capped red by the setting sun. Up there, in the aether, all was peace. An eagle, best of omens, turned a lazy circle to his right. Closer, less auspicious birds circled.

Kineas felt that as long as he kept his attention on the realms of the heavens, he would be safe from his fear. The gods had always spoken to him – awake, in omens, and asleep, in rich dreams. He needed the gods today.

Noise and motion to his right distracted him and his eyes flicked down from the safety of the empty spaces to the banks of the Pinarus River, the flat plain, the scrub, the beach, the sea. And directly in front of him, separated only by the width of the river, waited thirty thousand Persian horsemen, their files so thick that they had raised a sand cloud, so deep that their rear ranks were visible over the cloud on the lower slopes of a distant hill across the Pinarus. His stomach clenched and rolled. He farted and grimaced in embarrassment.

Niceas, his *hyperetes*, gave a grunt that might have been a laugh. 'Look out, Kineas,' he said, pointing to the right. 'It's the boss.'

Horsemen, a troop of twenty or so, their cloaks flashing with gold ornament, their chargers heavy and magnificent, cantered along the plain toward the edge of the beach where the Allied Cavalry waited for their doom.

Only one was bareheaded, his blond curls as bright as the gold gorgon's head that pinned his purple cloak, his horse covered in a leopard's skin. He led them across the hard-packed sand to the General of the Left, Parmenio, just half a stade away. Parmenio shook his head and gestured at the hordes of Persian cavalry, and the blond curls shook with laughter. The blond shouted something lost on the wind and the Thessalians in Parmenio's bodyguard roared and shouted his name – *Alexander! Alexander!* And then he cantered back along the beach until he reached the Allied Cavalry, six hundred horsemen all alone to the front of the left wing.

Despite himself, Kineas smiled as the blond rode towards him. Behind him, the men of the Allied Cavalry began to cheer, 'Alexander! Alexander!' It made no sense – few of them came from cities with any reason to love Alexander.

Alexander rode to the front right of the Allied Cavalry and raised his fist. They bellowed for him. He smiled, exhilarated, beamed at their approval. 'There's the Great King, men of Greece! and at the end of this day, we will be masters of Asia and he will be nothing! Remember Darius and Xerxes! Remember the temples of Athens! Now, Hellenes! Now for revenge!'

And he rode easily, his back straight, his purple cloak rippling in the breeze, every inch a king, cantering across the front of the cavalry, stopping to say this to one, that to another.

'Kineas! Our Athenian!' he called.

Kineas saluted, raising his heavy *machaira* across his breastplate.

Alexander paused, holding his horse with his knees, a horse that was a good two hands taller than Kineas's and worth a hundred gold darics. He seemed to notice the great host of Persian cavalry for the first time. 'So few Athenians with me today, Kineas. Be worthy of your city.' He squared his shoulders and his horse sprang forward. As he crossed the front, the cheers began again, first the allied horse and then the Thessalians, and then along the plain to the phalanxes – *Alexander*. He stopped to talk again, motioned with his arms, his head thrown back in the laughter that every man in the army knew – *Alexander* – and then he was riding faster, releasing his white horse into a gallop with his escort streaming behind him like the cloak around his neck, and every man in the army was screaming it – *Alexander*.

Parmenio grunted dismissively and rode over. He motioned for the allied *hipparch* and his officers to join him. He, too, gestured at the mass of Persians. 'Too deep, too packed together. Let them get to the edge of the stream, and charge. All we have to do is hold until the boy does the work.'

Kineas was younger than 'the boy', and he wasn't sure that he would hold his food down, much less stop thousands of Medes from pouring over the plain then forcing their way into the flanks of the phalanx. He was excruciatingly conscious that he was here as a commander of a hundred horsemen because his father was very rich and very unpopular for his support of Alexander, and through no merits of his own. The Attican horsemen behind him included a number of his boyhood friends. He feared he was going to lead them to their deaths – Diodorus and Agis, Laertes and Graccus and Kleisthenes and Demetrios – all the

boys who had played at being *hippeis* while their fathers made the laws and sold their cargos.

Parmenio's voice snapped him back into the present. 'You understand me, gentlemen?' His Macedonian Greek grated even after a year of hearing it. 'The instant they reach midstream, you hit them.'

Kineas rode back to the head of his squadron almost unable to control his horse. Anxiety and anticipation by turns wasted and intoxicated him. He wanted it to be *now*. He wanted it to be over.

Niceas spat as he rode up. 'We're being sacrificed,' he said, fingering the cheap charm he wore around his neck. 'The boy king doesn't want to lose any of his precious Thessalians. And we're just rotten Greeks, anyway.'

Kineas gestured at his troop slave to bring him water. He caught Diodorus's eye and the tall, red-haired boy winked. He was not afraid – he looked like a young god. And beside him, Agis was singing an ode to Athena – he knew all the great poems by heart. Laertes tossed his throwing spear in the air and caught it with a flourish, making his mount shy, and Graccus smacked him in the side of the helmet to get his horse back in line.

The troop slave brought him water, and his hands shook as he drank it. Far away to the right, there were shouts – a long cheer and the sound of Greek voices singing the Paean. That could be either side. Plenty of Greeks over there. Probably more Athenians with the Great King than with Alexander. Kineas looked to his front, tried to put his mind back in the aether, but the Macedonian phalanxes were moving to his right, shaking the ground, more a disturbance to be felt than anything he could see through the haze of dust they raised with their first steps.

The battle haze. The Poet spoke of it, and now Kineas could see it. It was terrifying and grand at the same time. And it rose to heaven like a sacrifice or a funeral pyre.

But he couldn't get his mind above the dust and into the blue.

He was right there on the beach, and the Persians were coming. And despite the shaking of his hands, his mind followed the actions of the battle. He could see the Macedonion *taxeis* in the centre moving through their clouds of dust. He could hear the shouts as the king moved the companions forward, and he felt the battle through all his senses as it flowed up the distant ridge. And the crash came as the centre engaged, the Great King's Greeks standing like a wall against Macedon's pikes.

The Persians to Kineas's front took their time. Kineas was able to watch the phalanx roll into the riverbed and struggle to cross the gravel and climb the bank on the other side, time to watch the Greeks and the

Persian infantry meet them at the top of the bank and stop them cold, dead men falling back down the steep banks to trip the men in the next rank as they climbed. Cheers on the wind from farther to the right.

'Eyes front,' said Niceas. He kissed his charm.

Just a stade ahead of him, a single Persian rider trotted into the stream and began to pick his way across. He waved and shouted and the mass of Perisan cavalry moved slowly down the shallow bank and into the Pinarus River.

Phillip Kontos, the Macedonian noble who commanded the Allied Cavalry, raised a hand in the air. Kineas's whole body gave a great shake and his horse shied a step, and then another, his tension communicated to the beast through his knees. He'd faced Persian cavalry just once before. He knew they could ride better than most Greeks and that their horses were larger and fiercer. He prayed to Athena.

Niceas started to sing the Paean. In five words, every man in the front rank had caught it up, the volume of sound swelling and spreading like flame in an autumn field, a fire of song that sent sparks shooting across to the Thessalians behind them. The Persian cavalry was at midstream, a solid front of horsemen.

Kontos dropped his hand. The Allied Cavalry began to walk forward, the horses excited, heads up, tails lashing. Kineas transferred his light javelin from his bridle hand, determined to perform a feat of arms he had practised for five years – to throw his first javelin and fight with his second, all at the gallop. He measured the ground to the front of the Persian cavalry. The mass of Greek cavalry began to move faster, through a trot and into a canter, the Paean shredding away as the hooves of the horses pounded out the sound. Kineas's mount left the sand and started down the shallow gravel bank of the Pinarus. He clenched his fist, signalling the charge, and Niceas's trumpet rang out.

He was done being an officer. Now he would be a warrior. The wall of Medes in front filled his eyes and the tension in his shoulders, and his gut fell away. His mare's head stretched out with her stride, reaching a gallop. He jammed his knees and thighs like a clamp on her back and rose, his back straight, and flung his javelin at the closest Persian. And his weapon hand travelled down, following through, grabbing his second javelin and bringing it up as his horse's hooves bit into the water of the stream and she collided, almost head on, with the mount of the man he'd killed – his javelin through the man's body – his little mare like an equine javelin, knocking the larger Persian horse down into the water, its hooves flailing. A blow against his unshielded left side connected with his helmet and his arms, pain – Kineas lunged at a

big man with a red beard, swinging the head of his fighting spear like a long club, parried, and his own spear broke at the impact, the bronze head cutting the Persian's cheek as they passed so close that their knees touched. And red beard was now behind him and he was unarmed. His horse was up to her knees in the water, her momentum spent and one of the Persian horses slammed into her, chest to chest and head to head, so that both beasts rose out of the water like duelling personifications of the river god, droplets a fountain of fire in the sun. The Persian stallion's rider lunged with his spear and Kineas twisted away and lost his seat. In an instant he was under the water, the riot of sound cut off. In a beat of his heart Kineas had his feet under him despite the weight of his armour, and his sword found its way into his hand as his head returned to the air and the din.

His mare was gone, pushed aside by the bigger Persian horse. Above him towered a huge grey. Kineas hacked at the rider's leg – a clear blow, blood blew from the wound and then the rider was in the water and Kineas was scrambling to mount, one hand locked in the grey's long blond mane, the other with a death grip on the hilt of his sword, the water dragging at his legs and his heavy breastplate pressing him down at every attempt to mount.

A weapon rang off his helmet, turning it so that he was blind. A blade scored across his upper arm, scraped across the bronze of his cuirass and then bit into his bridle arm. The grey, startled, bolted forward and dragged him out of the stream and up the bank he had so recently left, hanging from her mane, which panicked her so that she tossed her mighty head. Luck, and the strength of her neck, dragged him a hand's breadth higher than his best effort had reached before, so that he got a knee over her broad back. Another horse rammed into his side – the blessing of the Goddess, as the new opponent served to push him up on to his new mount's back, although the stallion's teeth wreaked a toll on the bare flesh of his thigh. He struck out blindly across his own body with his sword and it bit into flesh. With his bridle hand he ripped the helmet clear of his head and flung it at the enemy he could now see, with his sword hand he cut again, this time with intent, and his man was down.

Kineas couldn't reach the reins. His knees were locked on the big mare's back but he couldn't get her turned, and his back was to the enemy, his breastplate a sure sign that he was a Hellene and an enemy. He couldn't even see another Greek. He cut at a man coming behind him with a levelled spear and missed completely, almost losing his seat again, but the man with the spear rode by.

Reckless – or hopeless – Kineas leaned out across his new mount's neck and grabbed at the dangling reins again – missed, again – had them – too hard a pull and his mount was backing, rearing, then down on four feet. He turned into the stream and cut at a Persian. The man shied. Kineas thumped his heels into the flanks of his horse and she moved deeper into the stream, bit savagely at a stallion in her path while Kineas killed his rider, pushed further forward into the mass of Persians, and then he was on gravel, across the stream, pressed into a mass of enemies who could neither advance nor retreat because of their numbers.

He was an evil surprise to them, pressed so close that their javelins were useless and even his sword was too long and his arm burned with effort every time he raised it. He was deep in their formation. He didn't think or plan. He hacked and hacked and when the heavy sword was wrenched from his hand by the weight of a victim and the fatigue of his hand, he took his dagger from his belt, pressing his next enemy close so that he could smell the cardamom on the man's breath as he rammed his dagger into his armpit. He hugged his victim to him like a tired wrestler and the body was struck a mighty blow that rocked him back on his mount. He let go and the body fell between the horses. A javelin hit Kineas at the edge of his breastplate, the head punching into the sinew of his neck muscles before falling free. He tried to parry another blow but his left hand wouldn't obey and the man struck his cuirass with a sword so that it bruised his side, and then his horse pushed ahead and the man was gone.

He was at the top of the bank. He had crossed the river and he felt as unafraid as if his spirit was high in the aether or already on the road to Elysium – detached, aware in the last instants of his life that he was alone in the midst of his enemies, wounded ten times.

The instants stretched – *this is how the gods feel time* – and he was not dead. Or perhaps he was – he could only see as if down a long hall, so that it was difficult for him to feel threatened by the Persian he could see at the end of the tunnel in his head. He wanted to shout back across the minutes to the boy who had started the charge – *We will be a hero, you and I*. The thought made him smile, and then the tunnel spun and he felt a great blow on his back, sharp pain biting on his neck and heels.

He didn't know until later that his boyhood friends Diodorus and Laertes stood over his body like Ajax and Odysseus and kept the Persians off until the battle was won.

He didn't know until later that his action had broken the Persian cavalry.

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He recovered quickly, but not quickly enough to wear the wreath of laurel that Alexander awarded him as the bravest of the allies, or to hear his name cheered by the army. The wreath was pressed between boards of cedar in his baggage. Two years later another pair of cedar boards was pushed in beside it, pressing another wreath, one that cost him a scar five hands long down his right leg.

He learned about war – about how much pain his body could endure, about cold and heat, discomfort, desease, friendship and ambition and betrayal. At Guagemala he learned that he had a gift for *seeing* the battlefield as an organic whole, the way a physician might see a body, diagnosing its ills and proposing remedies. He read the Persians well enough to save his part of the front when the Persians pressed close and all seemed lost – and again he took a wound that put him down. A prostitute saved him from an ugly death on the battlefield, and he kept her for a while and then a while longer, and then they pursued the Great King to Ectabana, where barbarian traitors brought the Great King's head to Alexander in a sack and the army knew that Asia was theirs and theirs alone.

Ectabana smelled of smoke and apples. The smoke came from the campfires, as the whole army of conquest concentrated there after the death of Darius. The apples were everywhere, brought for the pleasure of the Great King and taken as spoil by the first units that came up the passes. For the rest of his life, Kineas loved the smell of apples and fresh-pressed cider.

Kineas was one of the first, and because of it there were another hundred gold darics in his baggage, he had a fine sword with a gold handle and he lay on a couch, his leman's breast under his hand, drinking cider from a silver cup like a gentleman instead of standing by a campfire drinking it from clay or horn like ten thousand other Hellenes. His woman wore a perfume that had come out of the palace, a scent that caught in his throat like the woodsmoke.

He was happy. They all were. They had beaten the greatest empire in the world, and nothing could ever stop them. Kineas never forgot the feeling of that night, the smell of smoke and apples and her perfume, like a tangible Nike lying in his arms. And then his boyhood friend Diodorus, who had ridden with him from Issus to Ectabana, an Athenian gentleman with a mind like a fox and red hair to match it, came in from his stint on guard duty, drank his cider and said they were going home.

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'The war of the Hellenes is at its end,' Alexander said. He sat on an ivory chair and wore a diadem.

Kineas loved to follow Alexander, but the chair and the diadem made him look like a stage tyrant. He stood impassively with the other allied officers. If Alexander meant to impress them, his words fell flat.

'You have served the League brilliantly. There is a reward here for every one of you. If any of your men choose to stay, they will be enrolled with the mercenaries.' Alexander raised his eyes from the sacks of coins on the ground by his chair. He had heavy circles under his eyes from drinking, but the spark was still there, dancing away, as if something inside his head was on fire.

Kineas wondered for an instant if there had been a mistake in phrasing – if he, too, would be welcome to remain and conquer the rest of the world. And then Alexander's eyes met his and he read his dismissal. The officers were to go home. Alexander spoke on, ringing phrases of praise rendered empty by the bags of gold at his feet. *I'm done with you. Go*. He lingered by the door of the king's tent when the other allied officers filed out, hoping for a kind word, an exception, but Alexander rose without another glance and left by another door.

So.

Kineas wondered if Alexander knew how much political poison smouldered among his precious Macedonians, but he clutched his thoughts close. He kept his own counsel when his leman left him for a Macedonian cavalry officer – one of many Phillips – rather than travel home with him, and he was laconic when a deputation of his men came to him and asked him to remain and command them. Some suggested that they remain together and take service with Alexander's regent in Macedon, Antipater.

Kineas had no interest in serving Antipater. In a day he had realized that he had loved Alexander, not Macedon. He packed up his darics and his wreaths, sold most of his booty, retained some fine cups for friends in Athens and a wall hanging for his mother. He kept the sword, and the heavy grey horse, and his stained cavalry cloak, and prepared to be a rich farmer. He had been away for six years. He would return a wealthy man, take a wife.

The Athenians went with him. Kleisthenes and Demetrios were rotting in the ground, or walking in the groves of Elysium, but Laertes and Agis and Gracus and Diodorus had survived battle and disease and misery and hardship. And Niceas. Nothing could kill Niceas. They rode towards home together, and no bandit dared ambush their convoy. When they reached Amphilopolis on the Greek mainland, none

of the other young men were ready to press on. They lingered in the wineshops. Kineas hurried home.

He found that he needn't have hurried.

In Attica, he found that his father was dead, and that he himself had been exiled for serving Alexander. He fled north, to Platea, where there was a community of Athenian exiles.

He'd only been there a day when he was approached by an Athenian with a proposition. Of course, the man came from the same faction that had arranged his exile. But Kineas had grown up with Athenian politics, so he smiled, and negotiated, and that night he sent Diodorus a letter, and another to a friend of his father's, another exile, on the Euxine.