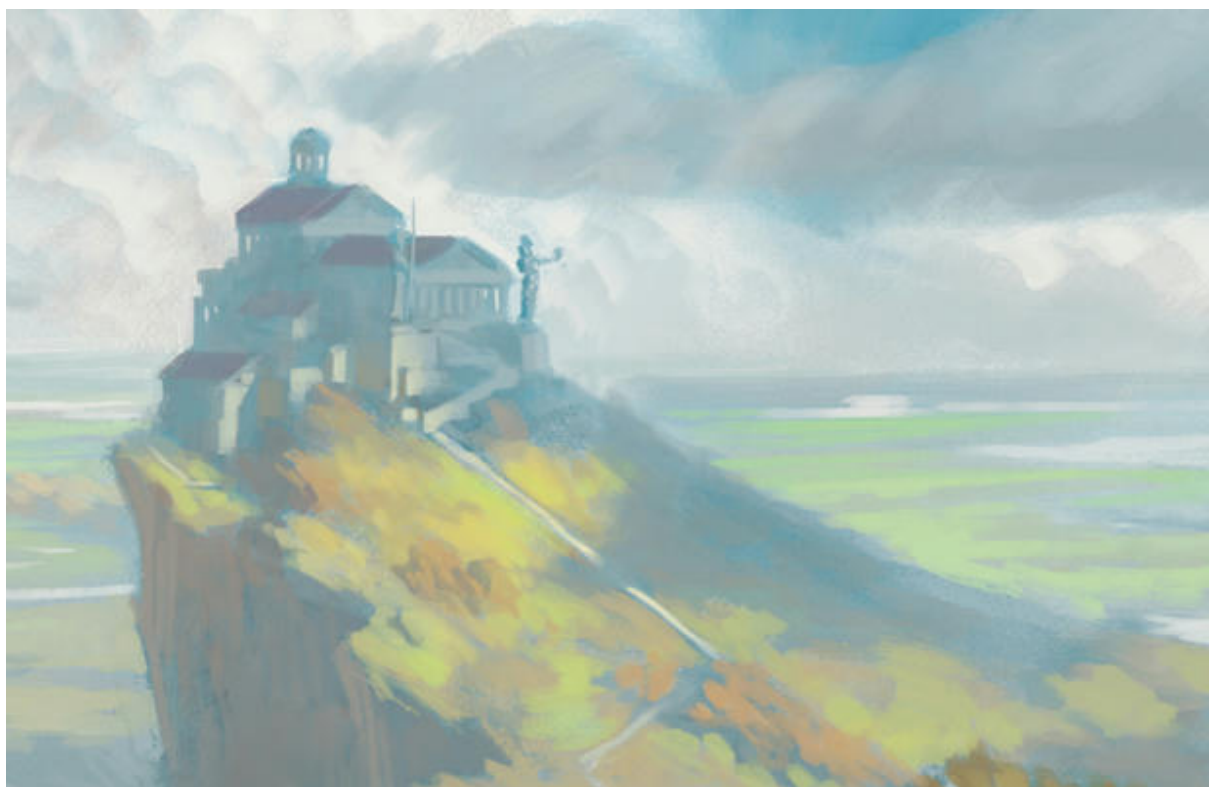


Prince Anax, Part 2

Tom LaPille

From set *Theros*

Anax approached an estate near the edge of the Kolophon. There was a small gate and a small fence, and on either side of the gate were two great stones with the name “Sinon” carved into them.



The estate itself was of medium size; Sinon was not exactly noble, but he had been the defending champion of the pankration for three Games running, and outright victory there could bring a man no small measure of wealth.

As Anax entered the gates, a servant approached him and bowed. “Your Highness, how might someone as lowly as Sinon assist you?”

Anax looked calmly at the servant. “I only wish to speak with him.”

“Of course, Your Highness.” The servant scurried off.

He returned a couple of minutes later. “Follow me, please.”

Anax followed him into a room where a man sat, a man who was tall sitting down. There was not a single strand of visible hair on his head or body, and tight cords of muscle rippled up and down his arms.

Anax sat down across from the man.

The man stared at Anax, his eyes giving nothing away. “Yes?”

"I would request the honor of training for the Games with you."

"Stand up." Anax glared at him but obeyed. Sinon looked him up and down, then stood and walked all the way around him. "You're fourteen?"

Anax turned his head to face the older man. "Fifteen, as of last month."

Sinon rolled his eyes. "Fifteen, sure. I only have time for one pupil. And you look quite a bit less promising than the one I'm already training."

"Excuse me?"

He turned his head toward the estate's courtyard. "Timoteus, I'll be right there!" Sinon looked back at Anax and shrugged. "Sorry."

"Sounds like that went poorly," said Zotikos. As usual, the gymnasium was nearly empty this evening, and only Anax was in earshot of the other boy.

Anax spread his legs, bent down on his right leg, and stretched his left hamstring. "Yes."

Zotikos made circles in the air with his arms. "You could always pick another sport."

Anax touched his toes for several seconds. "I already told Father I was going to do pankration."

"Oh." Zotikos's arms dropped to his sides. "Maybe I could help. Let's get everything out of the middle." They moved the weights to the side of the sand pit. "So how does this work?"

"We fight until someone goes unconscious or submits, but you can't bite or gouge out eyes."

Zotikos raised an eyebrow.

"Yes."

"And you're a little short," Zotikos said, "so striking doesn't seem like a great idea for you."

"I think I just threaten injury with joint locks until they submit. I can't imagine getting a knockout."

Zotikos scratched his head. "That sounds right."

Anax shrugged. "Want to try?"

Zotikos dropped into a back stance and his eyes went cold. Anax did the same. He crouched and tried to come in lower than Zotikos's center of gravity, but the other boy spun out of his grasp at the last possible moment, placing his hand on the back of Anax's neck. Zotikos shoved hard, and Anax tripped over Zotikos's planted foot and landed face first in the sand. The older boy dropped on top of Anax, grabbed his right arm, and pulled.

Anax's arm felt like it was about to pop out of its socket. "You win!"

Zotikos stopped the pressure. Anax rotated his shoulder, which still hurt. "How did you do that?"

Zotikos stood up. "I don't know. I just... did." He stood, furrowing his brow. "I guess that doesn't help."

Anax returned to his feet as well. "Not really."

Zotikos frowned. "I don't think I can help here."

Anax nodded. "I suppose not."

In the distance, the gymnasium door opened, and closed.

Zotikos looked over to where they had put the weights at the side of the sand pit. "So... more weight throwing?"

Anax shook his head. "I think I'm done for tonight. I'll see you again tomorrow."

Georgios was already in the classroom waiting for Anax when the prince arrived for his lesson the next day. "How did your errand go?"

Anax sighed as he sat down. "Sinon is already teaching my brother, and he won't take another pupil."

Georgios frowned. "That is unfortunate."

"Yes." Anax thought. "He might not have been the right teacher anyway, though. He was really big, and I'm not. Even if he won the last three games, someone smaller than him must have beaten him at some point."

"Do you know Kaletor? He is one of your Father's advisors."

"The older man with the twisted knee who walks with a crutch?"

Georgios nodded. "He competed in the pankration for several years. He was not a tall man even before his injury and might be willing to help. You will need to be careful with your approach, as he does not consider that a pleasant memory. He would not refuse a request to speak with you, although your father will not force him to help past that. I will speak with him on your behalf tonight."



"Thank you, Teacher."

The old man nodded. "Thesis: You are depending on me too much."

Anax sneered at him. "Going to the gym every night was my idea. I chose the pankration, not you. I can't know the history of every single man in the palace, but I told you exactly what I was looking for in a teacher. And," he said, "'too much' is hardly specific enough to defend."

The teacher nodded and smiled. "Very good!"

Kaletor's study was austere, little more than a cell with a table and two chairs. The man himself was just as severe, with a chiseled jaw and square head both covered in curly silver hair. Frown lines were worn deep into his face, and his swollen knee was just as gnarled as the twisted branch he used for a cane.

Kaletor regarded the prince from his seat with unguarded confusion. "Your teacher tells me that you wish to compete in the pankration four months from now."

Anax stood as tall as he was able. "I promised Father that I would, but honestly I don't know the first thing about how to do it well. I was wondering if you would be willing to help me."

"Four months is nowhere near enough for you to be a threat to win your division."



Anax shook his head. "I don't need to win the whole event. I just need to impress people." He thought. "And if I draw my brother, I definitely need to beat him."

Kaletor scratched his silver beard. "I can give you a chance at that, if you are willing to work."

"You should also know that Sinon is training my brother."

Fire flickered in the old man's eyes. "In that case, I will be honored to help you."

Anax smiled a hungry smile. "I train with one of my friends every evening at the gymnasium. Most people don't see us there, since we stay late. Would you be willing to come then?"

Kaletor reached for his cane. "I will be there."

Kaletor was true to his word, and began to teach Anax and Zotikos that very night. With his gnarled knee, he could not demonstrate techniques himself, but despite the injury he proved to be a capable teacher.

Kaletor's first lesson was that Anax should close immediately. An opponent shorter than Anax would also be weaker once Anax got him on the ground. An opponent taller than Anax would have a longer range before grappling began, and there was no reason to risk an early knockout from an unlucky strike to the head. It also saved training time, as they could focus exclusively on grappling.

Kaletor's second lesson was how to get the opponent on the ground. Anax was not as strong as the other boys his age—although he was beginning to catch up—and his best chance was to get them on the ground first, where technique could overcome raw strength.

After all that, Kaletor began to teach Anax all the ways to actually win a fight. There were holds that dislocated arms and legs, and ones that outright broke them. These, he said, were the easiest ways to win for the weaker combatant. There were many of these holds, and it took several nights to go through them all.

One night, Anax and Zotikos were practicing various locks. Anax went for an ankle lock, but Zotikos wriggled out of it, and Anax ended up with his friend's foot above his right shoulder instead. He felt Zotikos's knee reach the end of its extension, and started to push it even further.

"Stop!" They did, as Kaletor's voice had an unfamiliar note of fear to it. "That was highly dangerous!" He hobbled toward the two boys. "Anax, I'm impressed you found that, but you could have crippled him. If you push hard enough to force a submission from there, the other man won't walk normally again. Ever. You have to at least give them the chance to submit before that. Don't use that lock."

Anax stood and brushed sand off of his arms. "Is that what happened to you?"

Kaletor narrowed his eyes.

A few beads of sweat ran down Anax's face. "It was Sinon, wasn't it?"

Kaletor nodded.

"Would he teach my brother to do that?"

Kaletor's expression darkened. "It wouldn't surprise me."

"What would I do about it?"

Kaletor was lost in thought for a moment. "It has been a long time. Show me how you got there."

The boys showed him again, and he frowned. "Zotikos, there's a heel hook you can catch him in right there. Grab his heel, put your foot against his stomach, and twist just a tiny bit."

Zotikos did, and Anax yelped. "That hurts!"

"Don't push any harder. If you put anything on that—and I do mean anything—you'll break the ankle, and maybe do worse. It's nasty, but it'll work."

Anax smiled a little. "I'd like to try that."

"Anax," Kaletor said. The prince looked up at his teacher. "I showed you that because I trust you. Promise me you won't hurt anyone with it."

Anax nodded. "I need to win, not break people. I don't want to hurt anyone."

"Good. Now switch positions, and I'll show you, too."

Kaletor showed them both the heel hook that night, and many other things in the coming days. Slowly, painfully, Anax improved, and both teacher and student began to believe that Anax would be ready.

The stadium was packed to the brim for the junior division of the pankration, which was not the usual state of affairs. Normally, only the parents of competitors attended, but word must have spread throughout the Kolophon that the king's sons were competing. As it was, even the aisles were full of standing spectators.



Anax's first two bouts were easy. Both of his opponents were a few years younger than he was, and neither had much of a handle on how his body worked. After Kaletor's training, neither posed much of a challenge.

In the third round, however, Anax drew his brother. Timoteus had range, and therefore tried to start with strikes. His first jab was only a feint, too far out of range to be a serious threat. He stepped forward, and then threw a real punch. Anax could have blocked it and closed, but he flinched, and drew back instead.

Timoteus shifted his weight forward and threw a kick toward Anax's groin. This time, Anax was quick enough to dart inside the kick's range. He grabbed his brother's kicking thigh and opposite shoulder and shoved, and like that the two were on the ground.

Anax landed on top of him, but Timoteus recovered more quickly, and began to twist into position for an ankle lock—a safe move, one that would force Anax to submit but posed little threat of injury. Anax was a few inches away from position for a heel hook, but unless Timoteus overextended himself, there was no way for Anax to reach it.

Anax shifted his weight slightly, offering Timoteus the chance for a different lock—the kneebar that had crippled Kaletor. Timoteus went for it without a second thought. Anax was ready for him, though,

and caught his brother's heel at the last possible moment. He twisted—just barely enough to make his point—and Timoteus froze and raised his index finger.

The crowd applauded as the two boys stood. Timoteus's face was a mask of rage as he turned away.

When the applause finally died down, Anax regarded his brother with contempt. "I'm disappointed," he said, loudly enough to carry but softly enough that it wouldn't seem like anything more than a private conversation.

Timoteus brushed sand off his shoulders as he turned back to face his brother. "What?"

Silence spread through the crowd. Many of the spectators craned their heads forward to hear. "You could have won safely, but I gave you the chance to cripple me the same way Sinon crippled Kaletor. And you took it. That let me reverse the hold." Shock appeared on many faces in the crowd. Anax put a mask of haughty disappointment onto his own. "And at the end, I could have ripped apart your ankle. You would never have walked again. But who would want to serve a king who crippled his own brother?" He took three steps away, and looked back over his shoulder. "I wouldn't."

Chatter exploded throughout the stadium. Anax left the ring without another word and prepared for the next bout, doing his best to ignore the crowd. He wanted very much to shout with triumph, or at least to smile. But that is not what a prince does, so he did not.

He lost his next bout to a tall young man who was about to come of age, and was stronger and more skilled. After the respectful looks that everyone gave Anax, though, he did not need a visit from Iroas to know that he had won.

Anax stood in the palace's private courtyard with his father, mother, and sister. Timoteus knelt alone in the center of the courtyard. Fifteen feet from him was a burly man holding a whip. The man drew the whip behind his head.

Crack.



A thin line of red appeared on Timoteus's back. The wound would heal, but he would bear its mark forever. Such was the cost of political crime in Akros.

Crack.

A second red line appeared. Blood from the first one began to drip. This punishment was a liberal interpretation of Akroan treason laws, but King Athanas was furious with his second son, and had insisted.

Crack.

A third line appeared. No one would ever forget that Timoteus had tried to cripple his future king.

Father turned to Anax, and the grim look on his face became a bit less stern. "We have begun the process of finding you a wife. We are considering a young woman named Cymede. She comes from a powerful family that we would do well to placate, but she is also beautiful. She will make you a fine queen."

Anax wanted very much to shout with triumph, or at least to smile. But that is not what a king does, so he did not.