

Prince Anax, Part 1

Tom LaPille

From set *Theros*

Anax ran around the edge of the gymnasium. The scalding summer sun was getting high in the sky. He was sweating and his lungs burned, but it felt good.

He ran past the rack of spears and swords, past the stand of weighted practice shields, past the leather aprons and piles of stones. He ran past armored soldiers drilling shield walls, past men throwing weights in the sand pit.



Art by Steven Belledin

Once, he ran through the garden, for a few minutes of shade. One was not supposed to run through there; Anax was, however, the first son of King Athanas, and so no one stopped him.

The bathhouse was crowded this particular early afternoon. It was early for the crowd to hit under normal circumstances, but Father's final audience with the Setessans was only an hour away. Everyone was expected to be there, both to be part of the display and to see what would happen.

Anax lingered in the tub, savoring the cool water on his skin. Before too long, the water felt cold, and he began to shiver. He climbed out and dried himself. His younger brother's voice came from behind him, with only barely concealed reproach. "So what did you do this morning?"

Anax turned to regard Timoteus. Anax was the elder by two years, but he had never been large, and his brother had never been small. Now they were the same size, although perhaps Timoteus's arms were a little bigger. Naked as they were, they were on display for everyone to see. No one made a show of looking, but there was no shortage of sideways glances from the men who would follow them into battle in half a decade.

"I finished Archaelos's *Effective Rhetoric* and ran eleven laps around the gymnasium," Anax said.

Timoteus snorted. "I threw the thirty-mina weight three feet farther than my previous best and did spear drills with a Lukos commander."



Art by Winona Nelson

Anax walked to the stool where his clothes were folded and began to dress. Timoteus turned to leave, but looked back over his shoulder. "When the Setessan army is bored of talking, is your plan to run away?"

A few men nearby stifled chuckles. Anax's face burned.

The Setessan ambassador entered the audience chamber with her entourage, wearing rich green linens. The chamber was filled to the brim with Akroan warriors lined up in formation. The ambassador approached the dais and bowed to Father with a flourish. "King Athanas, it is most unfortunate that we could not come to an accord."

Mother and Father stood tall and proud, their red cloaks trimmed with gold. Anax, Timoteus, and their sister Pelagia stood next to them. Father glared daggers at the ambassador. A few gray hairs had snuck into his beard. "You know my position. You are free to dispute it on the battlefield if you wish."

The envoy smiled mirthlessly. "The Setessan council is patient and our memory is long." She limply pointed an arm at Timoteus. "We may take this up with your heir."

Father put his right arm on Anax's shoulder and scowled. "This is Anax, my eldest."

The ambassador looked Anax up and down appraisingly, then frowned. “Your adherence to tradition is admirable, your majesty.”

Father dropped his right arm to the hilt of his sword. “And you are a council of cowards. It is time for you to leave.”

The ambassador bowed with a flourish and led her entourage out of the room without another word. Attendants closed the door behind them, and Father spoke. “I offered the Setessans what I thought was fair in return for the grievances they brought, and that was not enough. They will bring an army, or they will not.” He drew his sword and raised it above his head. “But if they do, we will crush them.”



Art by Peter Mohrbacher

The soldiers roared their approval.

“You are dismissed,” he bellowed to the room, and the soldiers filed out. When they were gone, Father squatted and regarded his sons. He looked at the two of them together, as if he were seeing them for the first time. His eyes shone with pride as he looked at Timoteus. When he moved to Anax, his brow furrowed, and he did nothing to conceal his contempt.

Anax sat across from Georgios, the aging man who served as the personal tutor to King Athanas’s children. His smile pulled at the wrinkles around his eyes and mouth. “Are you ready to begin?”

Anax nodded. “Thesis: Father doesn’t like me.”

Georgios jumped back in surprise. “What makes you say that?”

“He scowled at me today, and looked at my brother with pride. It happened in the open, and I’m sure many people were watching.”

Georgios composed himself again. “Do you think it is truly you that he does not like?”

“I do not have another explanation.”

The old man smiled. "Thesis: a king should value his realm's welfare above the individual preferences of himself or any of his subjects."

Anax thought. "That makes sense."

"Thesis: the most important decision a king makes is choosing his heir."

"Are the inheritance laws not clear?"

"Does the king have the authority to change laws?"

Anax's eyes went wide. "I'm going to the gymnasium."

Georgios gave him a disapproving look. "That is neither a thesis nor a question."

The student stood. "And I am the Prince of Akros. Thank you for the lesson, teacher Georgios."

Georgios pulled himself to his feet with a smile. "You're quite welcome."

The sun was already setting by the time Anax got to the gymnasium. He made his way to the sand pit, where the weights were. There was another boy in the pit as well; he was taller and stronger than Anax, and likely a few years older.



Art by David Palumbo

The other boy looked up at him with a slight smile, then at the setting sun. "A bit late to start working out, don't you think?"

Anax deflated for a moment, then fire began to burn in his belly. He drew himself up and walked toward the other boy with purpose.

Recognition and horror took over his face, and he recoiled. "Oh no. I'm sorry. Uh, hello there, I'm Zotikos. I haven't seen you use these before, but I could show you how."

Anax walked into the sand pit. "I would like that."

The older boy took one of the smaller weights in one hand and motioned for Anax to do the same. "Okay. Plant your feet at shoulder width. Hold the weight with both hands. Push out with your hips like this, and the weight should swing forward. Try to get it up to your chest, but without using your arms too much." He demonstrated a few repetitions, then stood. "That's about all you should do to start. You can throw them too, but you shouldn't do that until you're used to them."

Anax nodded. He hoisted the weight and tried to mimic the other boy's movements. After several repetitions, his shoulders, back, and hips were killing him.

Zotikos watched him struggle. "You should stop."

Anax dropped the weight and grunted. "I could keep going."

Zotikos nodded. "And then you would not be able to come back tomorrow. Stop and save your strength. You'll grow faster in the long run that way."

Anax nodded.

"One other thing. I often see you running around the track." Zotikos pointed at the pile of leather next to the weapon stands. "That's what the aprons over there are for. You put one on, put some rocks in the pocket, and go. A lot of kids don't like doing it because it's hell on your legs, but you seem to like running, so it might be good for you. It could give you a leg up on them." He chuckled at his own joke.

Anax nodded. "If you wouldn't mind, I would like to meet you here at about this time every day. I may start late, but I promise you I work hard." He flashed his best princely grin.

Zotikos considered for a moment too long, and gave a calculating smile. "I would be happy to."

The next day, Anax tried the aprons with the weights, just like Zotikos had said.

It made sense that the other boys didn't like it, because it was difficult. But he kept at it during his morning workouts, and it did make him stronger. He never got as far with the apron on, but the running itself was not the point anymore. The evening sessions with Zotikos continued too, although it quickly became clear that the older boy was quite a bit more skilled than Anax was.

One evening, Anax pressed him. "Why are you helping me?"

"You're the prince." Zotikos had not so much as blinked before answering.

Anax dropped his weight in the sand. "You don't have to, though, just like you don't have to come here every night. Why keep doing it?"

Zotikos sighed. "My father is a common foot soldier, and he has no ambition to rise higher. I train so I can surpass his station." He put his weight down and stretched. "And it seemed like you were looking for a friend."

Anax walked closer and put on his sternest face. "Am I a friend? Or am I just the prince?"

The older boy went down on one knee and stared at the sand. "I'm sorry, your highness..."

"Anax." The prince extended his hand, palm up. "Stand up." The older boy looked up and stood. "In the hallways of the palace, when I wear a laurel crown, then you may use my titles. But not here." He walked back toward the weight he had been using. "Here—" and he hefted it— "I am Anax."

Zotikos didn't say much for the rest of the evening. The next day, though, he talked quite a bit more.

In the following weeks, Anax expected the soreness and the increased strength. What he did not expect was that the other soldiers began to watch him and his brother with critical interest.

Anax sat across from Georgios in the small classroom. His legs were quite sore, but they felt good, and they were getting wider too. "Thesis: I'm getting stronger."

Georgios smiled and nodded. "Defend the claim."

"You believe it though!"

The older man gave him a sideways look. "I do, but this is a lesson about rhetoric. Convince me."

"I ran eleven laps on the sand track yesterday with four mina of rocks in my apron."



Art by Clint Cearley

Georgios nodded. "So you can run."

"I threw the thirty-mina weight a foot farther than my best."

He nodded again. "So you are stronger. How do you fight?"

Anax gave a mild pout. "That was not part of the claim."

Georgios chuckled. "Thesis: You will need to convince more people than just yourself that you are ready to rule Akros."

Anax sighed. "I grant your thesis. How do I do that?"

Georgios raised an eyebrow. "I don't know. If I were better at that sort of thing, I might have ended up in a higher position than the personal tutor to the king's children. But I do know that the Iroan Games will take place in four months, and that you will be expected to compete in at least one junior-division event."

“And my brother will too, no doubt.” He slumped.

“He has begun training for the pankration, in fact.”

Anax frowned. “The most impressive combat sport at the Games. Of course.”

Georgios rolled his eyes. “Thesis: four months is a long time.”

“That’s indefensible! ‘Long’ is relative.”

“Thesis: You understood my point.” He glared at his student. “You could train for any event and be ready in time.”

Anax shook his head, smiling slightly despite himself. “In Rhode’s *The History of the Setessan Wars*, she speaks of the occasional wisdom of attacking the enemy boldly at his strength. If you win, you win utterly.”

“If you lose, you also lose utterly.”

“Thesis: I am already losing.”

Zotikos scratched his head. “You would know that better than I, but this path is risky.”

Anax smiled. “I have some ideas.”