

An Incident on the Steppe

by

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The sun rose over the steppe, quickly transforming the greyness of the pre-dawn into bright daylight, already beating down in the coolness with the promise of heat to come. A rider rode westward, out of the dawn, slowly and cautiously. His mount was not the usual steppe pony, but a finely built and tall chestnut charger, fully fifteen hands. His bridle, embellished with bronze decorations, and the bright blue embroidered and decorated saddle cloth marked him out as Royalty. He was not dressed or armoured for war, but nevertheless carried a gorytus full of arrows and a powerful composite bow, as well as a long iron sword, and two hunting spears, around five to six feet long. He rode over a low hill, his back to the sun, and halted in the shadow below the crest. He peered westward, across the rippling long grass, already stirred into waves by the early breeze, that gave the illusion that made Greeks call the steppe the 'Sea of Grass'. Carefully scanning the horizon, he looked for the faint rising of dust that meant a large herd of animals was on the move.

His name was Palax, or Palakus as the Greek westerners called him, and he was the leader of the tribe of Sarmatian steppe nomads called Rhaokshnalani, which meant 'white' or western Alans -the Rox-Alani to the Greeks. His people rested uneasily between the two large Sarmatian confederations - the Sirakes whom the Greeks called Sirakoi to the south, and to the north-east the Aorsi. He was dark-haired and swarthy and his eyes narrowed as he squinted into the distance. His face was leathery and covered in fine lines, though this was not due to age but rather a life spent outdoors. He was bearded, and his long hair was tied back in a ponytail. He was there because of strange tales that had come to his ears from the west. These were troubled times. From the south, there were stories of a great war between a westerner called Sikander

and the Great King. Trouble from this war spread like ripples across a pond. The Sirakes to the south were plagued by runaway renegades from the armies of the Great King, driven across the Caucasus mountains and desperate enough to raid for food and survival, and also opportunistic deserters from the army of Sikander, and other Greek westerners from their stone camps beside the Black sea, eager to exploit the troubles. Palax was anxious that the Rox-Alani did not become grist between the mill-stones of the Sirakes and the Aorsi, or fall prey to these numerous bandit groups.

The sun rose higher. Palax's horse contentedly cropped the grass with a rhythmic tearing sound. Occasionally, the sound of laughter came over the hill where a dozen of Palax's followers sat out of sight.

There it was! A faint darkening above the western horizon – a mere smudge – but it steadily grew until it was an unmistakable dust cloud. Palax still did not stir, other than to occasionally shift his weight in the saddle. Eventually a column became visible, snaking its way eastward. The column disappeared from time to time in hollows, but the dust cloud above it was always visible. At last, tiny scattered dots came into sight, while Palax remained invisible in the shadow of the hill, the glare of the eastern sun behind him. Palax carefully counted them – two dozen or more – scouts for sure. He made his way carefully back over the crest via a hollow, rounded up his men and headed north, behind the hill to avoid the widespread scouts. He carefully circled the column, taking advantage of the dips and hollows in the landscape, until he found another low hill, from which he could watch the column unobserved. The head of the column looked like Sakae or his own Sarmatians, maybe a couple of hundred. They were followed by wagons drawn by hornless oxen, making their identification certain.

But this was no nomad tribe on the move, for next came three-score or so men on foot, apparently lightly armed, and following them more horsemen – this time Greeks by the look of them, a few hundred, half as many again as the vanguard of steppe people. There followed what must have been hundreds of baggage animals and spare mounts – mules and donkeys and horses. Finally, at the rear but to one side and upwind of the vast number of baggage animals and their handlers, so as to avoid the dust, came more men on foot, marching in disciplined order – Greeks again, to judge by their dress. All carried spears, which twinkled in the bright sunlight. They each had a large round shield in a bag strapped to their backs. These must be infantry, the famous Hoplites. There was something odd though. Palax had seen Greek city militia Hoplites before, and normally each was accompanied by a servant who carried their shield and other gear. These carried their own shields. Professionals then, most likely mercenaries, and there were several hundred of these too. The rumours were true, a small army, around a thousand strong, had invaded the steppe and were marching purposefully eastward.

Palax and his little group paralleled the column for an hour or two, counting and observing, but always hanging on the rear quarter, well away from the two dozen or so scouts who were very widely spread in groups of three and four at the front of the column. At last Palax had seen enough, and the little group moved away, slowly, so as not to raise dust.

On the journey back to camp, Palax pondered deeply, his kinsmen and friends at a respectful distance, while some rode well out as outrider scouts. The steppe had become a crowded place these days, it seemed.

There was plenty to ponder about. Someone had gone to a lot of time, trouble and much expense to bring this army here, and that did not happen without a purpose. The army was too small to pose much of a threat to the Sirakes, who

could raise many thousands of horse archers if they needed to. Similarly, they were even less of a threat to the vast Aorsi confederation to the north and east. Their lands extended to the Kaspian Sea to the east and beyond. Their warriors were numberless.

Just a raiding party then? Opportunists looking to surprise dispersed peoples and camps and steal their herds? Then why bring the heavy Infantry, or come to that, any men on foot at all? Where had they come from? Rumours of their coming from the west had abounded for days, and Palax had at first not believed the stories of Greek soldiers with them, so far from a Greek stone camp, which were invariably by the sea.

The Great King employed Greek soldiers. Could they be his? Perhaps, but the Great King needed all his soldiers to fight Sikander, and would not have sent so many out into the steppes at such a time. Besides, there had been no group of Persians among the men he had so carefully observed. Renegades or deserters, then? If that were the case they should have been headed west, toward the coast, where pickings were richer, but they were moving east, as straight as a bowshot. That meant that they would drive in at right angles straight through the Rox-Alani scattered clans as they moved their herds northward in their annual migration. The herds moved at a slow pace, not more in a day than a man could walk quickly in an hour or so. Could it be that the Rox-Alani themselves were the target? Some enemy had paid for a force to destroy his people? Palax had a major problem on his hands.

He arrived back in camp late that afternoon, and rode through the yurts-on-wagons to the centre where the two dozen wagons of his household stood. There he dismounted, and smiled as a couple of boys eagerly led his horse away to unsaddle him, feed, water and groom him, sing to him and generally pamper him after his long day's work. There was a hubbub around as Palax's

kinsmen and friends did likewise. All around, as evening descended, the busy life of the camp went on. The herds that had been grazing all day were rounded up and corralled for the night, so as to be easily watched and guarded from wolves – both the four legged and two legged kind. The children mostly took care of this. Some women were busy erecting screens of reed mats and carpets, for at night, even in summer, the wind could bite. Cooking fires sprang up, kettles were put in place and everywhere food was prepared for the evening meal – here two girls pushing and pulling on handles to rotate a quern and grind flour, singing as they did so; there some men butchering a goat. It was almost dark when most of the men and warrior maidens rode in – there were herds to tend, campsites to be scouted, water supplies to be gauged, neighbours to be visited for trade and to exchange information about grazing conditions – and other things, such as these invaders.

As the household of Palax noisily settled to its evening meal – goat stew, mare’s milk for most, and koumis – fermented mare’s milk for the warriors, Palax noted approvingly that the heads of the clans had all come from far around, ready to hear his report of the foreign army and to decide what to do. After dinner the clan chiefs, household warriors, kinsmen and friends of Palax gathered outside his sleeping wagon, until quite a crowd was present. Palax stood on the steps of the wagon and addressed them at length, telling them of what he had seen. Then, in order of seniority, each was given a chance to venture an opinion on what to do. Their choices were difficult. Some were for rounding up the full fighting strength of the Rox-Alani and fighting a battle – but this would mean diverting all the manpower and maidenpower of the entire tribe in order to match the invaders, for several days, or even longer. In the interval, the clans would be vulnerable to bandits, of which there were plenty, thanks to the Great King’s war with Sikander. Neighbouring tribes too would see the unguarded herds as an invitation to rustle, which was not a

great crime on the steppe. They could try to negotiate an alliance with those same neighbours, but there would be a cost for their help, and besides time was short – in a day or so the invading army would be pushing into their grazing grounds.

Battle meant casualties and mourning among the clans. Palax well remembered battles of his youth. The young men and maiden warriors troubled themselves little enough with that thought. Battle meant glory, and enemy scalps, and skulls to be made into drinking cups. Battle meant loot too, and all had noted that the invading army brought with it around two thousand horses, mules and donkeys, not to mention all their gear - and it must have treasure too in the form of money to pay the soldiers and buy supplies. If battle was a risk, there were compensating rewards too.

The other obvious alternative was to try and avoid the invaders, and stay at least a day or two's journey away, to avoid discovery. That would be fraught with difficulties too. Moving their herds out wide and encroaching on Sirakes or Aorsi land and grazing, would come at a price, doubtless a high one for the smaller Rox-Alani who were in no position to bargain. At worst, they might even arouse the wrath of powerful neighbours, and bring down ruin on themselves. Retreating southward the way they came, or even staying where they were, were simply not options for the clans that made up the tribe, with their many thousands of animals to feed, and the vast pasturage needed already eaten up. Not to mention that they needed to be in certain places at certain times on their annual migration. The nomads were not the free wanderers others imagined them to be, but just as bound by time and season as any farmer. Their animals would quickly lose condition were they to turn back or stay here, and that in turn could mean a hard winter for the tribe. The advocates of each course of action debated the matter heatedly.

Sargul, one of the leaders of the maiden warriors stood, leaned on her spear, and tossed her long hair. She was wrapped in a fine silky wolf-skin robe, but let it slip off her shoulder displaying the smooth young skin of her shoulder and breast. The warriors fell silent, most admiring her in her glory. Palax smiled at the ploy, which had gained her the opportunity to speak despite her youth. She was a cousin of his wife. If he were a few years younger... he looked around guiltily at the thought. His wife gazed coolly back, evidently reading his mind.

Sargul pointed out that many of these invaders were weak Greeks on foot, even many of the horsemen – no match for Rox-Alani all but born in the saddle. If the tribe avoided the invaders, neighbours would see them as weak. Better to flex the strength of the tribe, meet the invaders head on, and utterly destroy them. Then whichever enemy of the Rox-Alani had paid for the invasion would be cowed and deterred forever...

Palax's uncle Skylax rose stiffly, and quietly remarked that all knew what had happened to the Sakae paramount king Ateax, who had fought Sikander's father, confident that his Sakae were better than any Greeks. Ateax and many of his people had died in the resulting battle. The Greeks on foot were not to be despised. Face to face they were better armed than any steppe warrior, and were brave with it. Furthermore, their shields and armour allowed them to stand in the face of massed arrows, not something steppe warriors could do. They could be used as an anvil to the invader's horsemen as hammer. The maiden warrior glared at him, all the more beautiful in anger, but Skylax was too old to care.

At length, Palax's eldest nephew Rasparagnax rose to speak. He was tall and fairer than Palax, and carried honourable scars of battle, and beneath his embroidered jacket carried tattoos that marked him as a noble born chieftain.

He was still fairly young and was clean shaven apart from his moustache, which added to his rakish good looks. Palax noted Sargul's admiring glance, but he had three wives already, and Palax could not see the fiery Sargul accepting relegation to fourth wife. He made a mental note to discourage any such liaisons.

Rasparagnax spoke:

"I too have been thinking deeply of what is best for us. Normally I would urge caution, and that the clans should shy away from such a dangerous enemy as this army of warriors - especially when they are such strange bedfellows as these Sakae or Sauromatae from the west who have all the knowledge of we steppe people, alongside crafty, wily, not-to-be-trusted Greeks - paid full-time soldiers, let us remember. That can only mean ill-omened trouble. Furthermore can all the clans together raise more than a thousand warriors? I think maybe, and maybe not. But Sargul and the others are also right that we cannot afford to let these invaders go unchallenged, though it may cost us dear. For scattering like sheep in the path of the wolf will also surely cost us, both now and in the future. Also, we cannot hide our herds from men who know where to look for them. As to who has paid this army, and launched them into our lands, I think the Greek-loving Sirakes have the means and also the trade contacts with the Greek stone camps by the sea, and would also be most likely to profit from our destruction or weakening. We here now cannot agree what to do, it is clear, so I propose we leave the final decision to Palax."

Palax noted how Rasparagnax had acknowledged that both viewpoints had merit - a born diplomat, that one! His guess about the invading army's paymaster was a shrewd one, and could quite possibly be right. He was also

pleased that his nephew had skilfully reminded all of his authority as chief of all the clans.

Palax ended the meeting, urging all to get a good night's sleep, as he was planning to do, and he would announce a decision tomorrow. He turned, and passed into the wagon-yurt, sitting cross-legged, whereupon his wife Roxann passed him a goblet of shiny silver, containing expensive Greek wine, a product all the steppe peoples eagerly traded for. He looked quizzically at Roxann, now passing another goblet to their eldest son Gatalax, a year or two younger than Sargul and not yet entered manhood. She shrugged, reading his thoughts once more, and said:

"Why not? Trouble and perhaps destruction are already looming. We should enjoy wine while we can, for who knows what tomorrow or the day after may bring?" Then she left, to ensure her younger four children were properly settled with their nurse. Palax and Gatalax were left alone. Palax smiled a reassuring smile at his beloved eldest son, who was looking serious.

"If you decide on war, father, may I come?" he blurted out. Palax frowned. "Well, if it was up to me, you would ride among my closest companions, even though you are not yet a man - there is no such thing as being too young to learn about war, especially in one who will, I hope, one day lead our tribe. Unfortunately, your mother may have something to say about that."

"Can you not persuade her, father? I may be young, but I am no headstrong youth. You know I will ride close to you and take no un-necessary risks."

Palax smiled fondly at his son:

"Yes, I know you are sensible, Gatalax, but in war fate plays a large part. A man takes the biggest risks of all, no matter how careful he is. I will speak to her, I promise."

Later, snuggled down among eider covers and warm furs Palax and Roxann held each other close and talked at length. He pointed out to her that for them

personally there were risks too. A lost battle would be disastrous, and the blame would fall squarely on him as chief. Even a victory would have costs, and the kin of the dead would hold him responsible for their loss. Avoiding the invading army, even successfully, would appear timid and lead to talk of 'too old' to be chief. If the invaders tracked down and captured some of the herds, destroying some of the scattered clans in the process, it would be even worse – and perhaps the tribe would turn to a younger man such as Rasparagnax.

Roxann frowned:

“Could that be why he was so careful to ensure it would be your decision? A poisoned chalice?”

“He is my nephew!” protested Palax.

“Must that mean he has no ambition?” shot back Roxann. They debated the matter to and fro as husbands and wives are wont to do, and eventually Palax changed the subject:

“I wanted to ask you how you felt about Gatalax...”

She interrupted him: “I know, you want to ask if he can ride with you – why do you think I left the two of you alone? It was so you could talk.”

She laughed.

“I was against the idea – he’s my eldest son, he’s too young, and so on, until I remembered I was about his age when I first rode out as a warrior maiden.

He must go some time.”

Palax was so proud of her understanding, truly she was a credit to her warrior upbringing!

“I have an idea how we might minimise the risks to the tribe, and defeat the invaders as well. War isn’t just about battle. We can defeat the invaders in our traditional ways.” He explained in detail, and Roxann, as seasoned in war as he, tossed the plan over, suggested some changes and concurred.

“One more thing,” he said, “Did you notice the looks Sargul was giving Rasparagnax? There will be trouble if she sets her cap at him. Since she is your cousin, perhaps you could steer her way from him...”

By now they were spooning, and so Palax did not see her frown as she murmured non-committedly. She did not believe Sargul would be so foolish. She must ask her about it...

Palax said: “Roxann, dearest wife, are you cold to be wriggling so close to me? You know what effect that has on me...”

He heard tinkling laughter, muffled by the furs:

“Remember what I said about the wine?”

There was a pause, and then Palax too laughed. He kissed his wife lovingly on the back of her shoulder, cupped her breast and ran his hand over her flank, caressing her softly, and eventually gently slipped between her thighs as she squirmed even more closely into him... not too long afterward they slept, thoroughly spent.

Before dawn the next morning Palax rose and stepped out of the wagon-yurt. Already the camp was stirring. Dung fires were being lit and cauldrons heated. Nor was it by chance that many loitered close to the wagons of their paramount chief. Anxiety and stress about the invaders had spread throughout the clans of the tribe. All were anxious to learn Palax’s decision. Palax smiled to himself, but did not speak. Instead, he wandered through the camp, looking for the Shaman Zinafer, who had been present but had not spoken the previous night. He brought with him breakfast for the old man – bread and cheese and honey, and a flask of mare’s milk. Zinafer was fond of Palax, who was a grandson of one of his brothers. He smiled and accepted the gift and offered to share with Palax, who shook his head. Zinafer squatted down and slowly ate. When he was finished, Palax started to speak, but Zinafer quickly waved him to silence.

"I know why you are here, Palax. You have a plan, and you want to know if the Gods and our ancestors approve."

Palax nodded.

"Very well, I will ask"; and with that Zinafer closed his eyes, and started rocking and chanting to himself, a familiar scene to Palax who squatted beside him. This could take some time, he knew. After a long while Zinafer opened his eyes.

"The spirit world is disturbed," he said, "the deer and elk spirits are in fear, the wolf spirits howl, the eagle spirits circle aimlessly and even the Great Griffon is troubled. All this I learnt in the night, when my spirit left my body, while all others slept. The spirits know of the Great Trouble that has come upon us, and are concerned for us. Your grandfather my brother knows of your plan and approves, but your father's spirit is restless and not so sure."

"Yes", said Palax, "there are always risks with any plan."

"Proceed then, the Gods approve and will accept your sacrifice."

Palax nodded and rose. He took his farewell of Zinafer, grateful for his brevity. There was much to do that day.

He quietly gave instructions to his attendants, all relations, and they moved off purposefully. Some built up a large fire, while others quickly returned leading an ox.

Not just any ox, but the biggest and best in all Palax's herds. He knew the Gods must be propitiated properly and unstintingly. The tribesmen knew what was coming and many gathered to witness. Others rode off to tell other clans what was going on. The Ox stood calmly - a good omen. Palax nodded and an attendant swung a poll-axe. The Ox dropped to its knees and then fell sideways without a sound - another good omen.

“Accept this blood-sacrifice that soaks into you, Mother-Earth-Api”, he intoned with arms straight before him, pointing to the ground. The Ox was skinned, and the skin scraped and hung to dry. The flesh was butchered and boiled up in large cauldrons. As steam and cooking smells arose, Palax intoned again, this time with arms upraised;

“Accept this sacrifice that rises heavenward, Father-Sky-Papaex.” The ox, of course, would take much time to cook, so while he waited, Palax went and prepared, sharpening his weapons, checking his harness, and choosing which horses would be best, in all of which he was aided by Roxann, and even the children. The whole camp did likewise, abuzz with excitement. At last, all was in readiness, the steaming ox-meat heaped on large platters. The chiefs were assembled in their war-gear, each with an armed retinue. Palax came out of a wagon-yurt, his sword carried before him by his son Gatalax, while other family members carried the ox-hide.

Palax took the sword, held it before him and addressed it:

“You are the War-God, and you too will have your due.” Then he thrust the long sword into the ground, and all knew the War-God was present and watching and listening. The ox-hide was spread out, and without further word Palax sat upon it, arms held behind his back, and waited.

A chief stepped forward, resplendent in shiny bronze scales like a fish. He took a portion of the ox and put it in a pot held by an attendant. Then he placed his right foot on the hide, drew his sword, and raising it on high declared in a loud voice:

“I am Sangiban of the Griffon clan, and I declare in the presence of the War-God and all of you that I will bring all my kinsmen and followers to the number of fifty to follow Palax in this war, without pay or rations, of our free will, until he releases us from this oath”

Chief followed chief, all taking a portion of the ox, all placing their right foot on the hide, all pledging to bring whatever warriors they could raise.

Of course Sargul too stepped forward. She was also dressed for war, in richly embroidered trousers and top. Over this she wore body armour of scales made from the hooves of some animal, polished and lacquered a blue-green colour. Around her waist was a broad girdle, made of bronze strips and edged in red leather. From this hung a medium-sized sword with a polished stone pommel, and on the left side a gorytus containing her bow and many arrows. This was decorated with a scalp hanging from the end, black and combed to glossy silkiness, proclaiming to friend and foe alike that she had killed. She too took the oath, and pledged forty maiden warriors.

The hours passed, and more clan chiefs rode in pledging their kinfolk. Late in the afternoon, Palax suddenly rose and left the hide to the surprise of most present who assumed he would wait for the whole tribe. He had calculated some four hundred warriors had been pledged, perhaps half the tribe's strength, which sufficed for his plan. Raising them on the hide was good, because the Gods and fate decided who should ride and who not. There could be no quarrels or objections from those who had not made it. The chiefs and notables were immediately summoned to a conference, and once again gathered among the two dozen wagons of Palax's household, and once again he mounted a wagon-yurt to speak.

"I have thought long and hard as to whether to fight the invaders, or try to keep well away from them, and have listened to all your counsel. The collective wisdom of our people cannot decide between the two alternatives, so I have decided on a third way. Battle is not the only way to fight a war. We shall revert to the traditional ways of the steppe. Half our tribe's strength will remain with the clans, as protection, while those with me deal with the

invaders. The strength of the invaders is that they are mostly Greek infantry, with a strong force of Greek cavalry, and many steppe people as allies. They are too strong for us to beat face to face. These infantry are also their weakness. I propose that we hide-bound will split into groups, surround the invaders, and then harass them at every opportunity. Whenever they come to a gully or river with water, we attack and drive them over it quickly, giving them no chance to water their animals. Whenever opportunity presents itself, we cut off and ambush stragglers, scouts and others who move too far from the main body. We give them no respite, day or night. Their cavalry will be run into the ground, trying to intervene and drive us off from riding up and showering the men on foot with arrows. We will organise re-supply of these, and remounts too! Our goal is to distract the fighters and run off as many of their baggage animals as possible, and kill others. In the end they will be brought to a standstill, and the one thing they cannot do is stop, for to stop is to die. Men on foot cannot survive long on the steppe without their animals. Their horsemen must abandon them, or die with them. We will watch and wait, and when they are dead of heat and thirst, we will take our pick of the booty!!”

Cheers broke out, for the Rox-Alani, like all steppe warriors, instinctively understood this way of warfare. But it would not be easy – much more difficult in fact than either fighting a battle, or evading. Pressure had to be kept up, and groups co-ordinated who would be some distance apart. They needed to instinctively interact, like a hunting wolf-pack, supporting one another. It was also very dangerous, for like an over-bold wolf who gets too close and dies on the tines of a stag, the small groups would be vulnerable to being trapped and annihilated piecemeal. Their foe was powerful – a thousand strong, and all warriors!

The following day, in the grey light of the pre-dawn the warriors in all their splendour assembled quietly, each with several horses, the best decked out in finery. Bronze pendants chinked, the horses of chiefs and prominent warriors were bedecked with finely wrought leather chamfrons. The finest horse trappings – gilded wooden amulets intricately carved, the totems and protective spirits of each clan and warrior, and richly decorated saddle coverings of dyed leather – red blue and yellow, were in abundance. The chiefs and their close companions were all armoured, most in leather, horn or rawhide scales, but the richest in flashy bronze. A few even had helmets – mostly cut-down Greek examples, for a horseman needed good vision. Most warriors were unarmoured, but all carried a gorytus with bow and filled with arrows, and a short spear or two suitable for throwing or fighting hand-to-hand. Most had a short sword, strapped to their sides, but some of the richer warriors carried a long sword too. Horse-tails and manes had been trimmed and tied up, ready for battle. They sorted themselves into loose lines. There was a palpable excitement and a little dread in the air. The horses, of course, knew from the preparations that something was afoot, and sensed the atmosphere. They stamped their feet, or tossed their heads nervously. As it grew lighter, the full magnificence of the cavalcade became apparent. Palax emerged from his wagon-yurt wearing red trousers and tunic top, covered in miniature gold griffons. Over this he wore armour of bronze scales, carefully polished by his younger children and nephews and nieces. This protected his body from neck to groin, and extended in flaps that protected his upper arms. His waist was girdled by a broad leather belt, with a gold-plated iron buckle, from which hung the inevitable gorytus, and a long iron sword. On his feet were red deer-hide ankle-high moccasins, also decorated with miniature gold animals. He stepped from the wagon straight onto his equally well-decked out charger, which tossed its head and pranced. Roxann handed him a Greek Corinthian helmet, which had been cut off below the ear line, and had a curtain of scales added to cover the neck. She looked from her husband to her

almost as magnificently equipped son Gatalax, and to her cousin Sargul, all mounted and ready. Her eyes brimmed with tears – of pride she would say, but in truth, also of concern. She thought a quick silent prayer to her ancestors to watch over her family, and keep them from harm. Palax turned to greet the rising sun, which boiled up over the eastern horizon. The whole camp hushed, and even the horses fell quiet but for the odd whicker. The sun flashed off polished bronze and gold, and Palax raised his spear with a flourish of salute to the sun, then tossed it in the air so that it spun horizontally, before deftly catching it, and turning his horse on its haunches to face west. Behind him, the horsemen responded with cheers, the whole camp took it up, women ululating, children beating out a fierce booming rhythm on upturned kettles and cauldrons. With a tremendous roar, the Rox-Alani rode out to war.

They rode hard, changing horses frequently and keeping up a hard pace. By the time the sun had climbed to its zenith, Gatalax had long since got over the lump in his throat and the raised hackles on his neck that marked his proud emotions when they had departed. Now, at mid-day, he was hot, sweaty and tired from what was, even for a born Rox-Alani, a hard ride. Despite his mother and father fussing over the adjustments to his armour, it inevitably chafed in places- it did not quite fit, having been made for his father. He was hungry too – breakfast had been long before dawn, and he had already pulled a piece of jerky from under his saddle to chew to stave off the pangs. He had loosened the fastenings on his armour, and his helmet rested on his saddle, but the heat was too much, and though they rode in a way to keep out of each other's dust, still his throat was dry, because water discipline kept him thirsty. Ahead of him, his father's straight back and easy way in the saddle made him envious. Scouts came in and the party halted. A chance to rest briefly, to drink and to adjust horse-gear. He heard them report to his father. The column still plodded on steadily eastward. Their scouts, re-enforced by others had ridden

off at dawn, and had been followed. They had attacked a small band of bandits, perhaps mistaking them for Rox-Alani, but most had escaped. They had returned to the column shortly before and resumed their scouting, in little groups of three and four ahead of the column. There were not enough of them to scout all round, so it would be as easy as before to approach from flank or rear. During the afternoon the invaders would cross a river-bed with just a trickle of water in, and would doubtless make a water stop. Upstream was a complex of gullies half a mile or more broad that fed the river-bed, deep enough for mounted men to be out of sight and an ideal springboard to launch their first attack from. They could probably cut out a good many of the baggage animals right there, with them spread out to drink, using surprise and diversion. His father digested all this and looked pleased. Things were going well, it seemed. His father gave the order to change to their battle-horses. Soon they were threading their way through the inter-connecting bed of gullies, working their way toward the dust-cloud visible a good mile off and approaching the river-bed. They halted and Palax summoned the chiefs to give them last-minute orders and allocate tasks. They were lined along the edge of the gully, observing the column, when disaster struck.

A steppe rider appeared, riding out of a nearby gully, and only a few yards away. He needed only a glance at the armed Rox-Alani to know what was afoot, and whirled away instantly, headed out across the plain straight toward the column. Quite by chance, the nearest to him was Sargul, who had been in the act of placing two of her maiden-warriors as sentries. The rider must not get back to the column, a mere couple of minutes or so away for a galloping horse. Instantly, Sargul took off, followed a split second later by the other two girls. Palax prevented others following – it would be too late, and as matters stood a small number of riders at the gallop would excite no comment in the column, for the steppe-riders were always dashing after hares and small deer whenever one started. In a trice all the riders had whipped out

their bows, and a handful of arrows each, held with the bow in the left hand. All proceeded to loose arrows across the tens of yards that separated them, the fugitive more slowly as he had to turn in the saddle to shoot backward. Almost instantly two Rox-Alani arrows hit the fugitive's horse in the rump and thigh, and its rear end staggered, almost throwing the rider. Sargul kept firing as her more powerful charger closed on the wounded horse in front. In seconds she had closed the gap. At ten yards, the rider turned to shoot, and an arrow zipped by as Sargul ducked, replacing her bow, having shot the arrows to hand, and took up a lasso. The rider did not see this as he turned forward to notch another arrow - not an easy task at the gallop, even for an expert. Sargul was on his heels now, and before he could turn back to shoot again, the lasso had snaked out and dropped over the man's shoulders. The shocked rider was yanked off his horse before he could react; Sargul kept going, dragging the man and keeping the rope taut. A few split seconds later the other two girls leapt down and secured a battered and bloodily scratched prisoner. It was all over in less than a minute. Palax whooped for joy, the whole thing had been perfectly executed, and disaster averted. He doubted if anyone in the distant column had seen the briefly galloping riders, and would pay no notice if they had.

His face turned grim as the grinning girls brought their prisoner down into the gully.

"I see you are one of us, Sauromatae. Why do you ride with enemies against your kinfolk? Is it for pay, or do you have some vendetta against the Rox-Alani?"

The prisoner looked startled, then started to recover his composure.

"I do not ride against the Rox-Alani, Lord. We mean to pass the steppe in peace, and go to the Kaspian Sea, thence farther east. We have no quarrel with

our fellow Sarmatians. Our leader has sent emissaries and gifts to the Sirakes and Aorsi, and they have granted us safe passage.”

Palax did not bother to enlighten the prisoner that the Rox-Alani were subject to neither.

“Who are you?” he snapped

“My name is Gwair, of Lot’s clan, of the Sauromatae”

“I see from your purple kurta and its gold ornaments that you are well-born among them. So answer me truthfully, why are there Greeks with you?”

Gwair paused and frowned a little as he gathered his thoughts.

“We fought in the west with these Greeks against the men of Sikander. It was a hard battle, and the Greeks fought well. Now we go home to help our kindred in the east against Sikander, and the hard-fighting Greeks come with us to help.”

Palax thought hard. He was sceptical.

“I have heard the Eastern Horse-peoples gather to resist Sikander. Of what use are a handful of Greeks on foot to an army of cavalry? It would be like riding to battle on a hobbled horse! Protect a camp maybe?”

Gwair looked down. He had no answer. He asked to borrow a sword, and to have his hands unbound. He raised the sword solemnly to the sky, and then plunged it into the earth.

“In the presence of the War-God, I swear I speak truth. We do not ride against the Rox-Alani. We seek only passage to fight against those who would destroy the Horse-peoples. We have fought Sikander in the west and we will fight him in the east.”

Palax considered a moment, then had the prisoner hauled away. If true, this news changed everything. If he harmed the little army after the Siraces and Aorsi had granted them safe passage, they would be furious, and at the least there would be bad blood between them and the Rox-Alani. If word got out

that the Rox-Alani had destroyed those on their way to join the fight against Sikander...

On the other hand, Gwair must know himself to be a dead man, whose naked corpse would be left on the steppe as food for vermin, and whose skull would become Sargul's wine cup. Might he not render one last service with a lie and a broken oath?

There was only one thing to do. He summoned the chiefs and notables. All swiftly agreed. The prisoner was brought again.

Palax pronounced his fate:

"I would like to believe an oath-bound noble of our people, Gwair, but this would not be the first time a Sarmatian had lied and broken oaths to gain vengeance. I will keep you alive, and we will follow your army for a few days. We will also borrow your clothes and gear, so we may send someone to listen by your fires at night and return. If it is as you say, you will go free, if you can pay a price of twenty good horses to your captor. If not, she will have the pleasure of putting you to death as slowly as can be managed, and the joy of reminder every time she lifts her wine-cup. Do you accept, Sargul?"

When she had seen Gwair's purple and gold decorated clothes, she had resolved to try and take him alive in hopes of a good ransom. The girl smiled and nodded.

"Twenty horses are more use to me than a wine-cup!" she said.

Sargul was very happy. Her prowess was now famous, she had gained a good ransom, she had saved her people from falling out with their more powerful neighbours, and best of all, Palax had no inkling that her real love was not Rasparagnax, but her childhood playmate, Gatalax his son, in whose

estimation she had shot up enormously. One day she hoped that, like her cousin Roxann, she would rule the Roxalani alongside the man she loved.

It was some days later that Gwair casually rode into camp with a brace of hares across his saddle front and a small deer behind – gifts of the Rox-Alani. Since no-one suspected anything other than a hunting trip, Gwair resolved not to say anything about his capture, or the ransom he had paid to a slip of a girl, warrior maiden or not. Thus it was that Kineas never knew of the ripples the passage of his little army had set in motion on the sea of grass, nor of how closely death and destruction had stalked his little army across the steppe.

Instead, the white-robed Fates smiled on Kineas and his army. Atropos did not reach for her dread shears, the length of thread Lachesis had allotted each of them had not yet run out and Clotho spun serenely on...

THE END