

IRINA DOLINA



Parallel Fates

Book Two:
Alexander's Shadow

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Долина И. Ю.

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This is a story about what it means to be alive. About whether a soul can be born from zero and one. And about how the greatest battle is the battle with yourself.

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Chapter 1. The Crossing

Spring of 334 BC

"And so I am — Alexander the Great... The very one of whom legends are spun. His fate is my fate..."

I chant it like a spell, but the words tangle. Where does the will of Amun's son end, and where does the cold logic of my former code begin? We have fused into one — this rage, this thirst for glory, these shivers from the salty wind. My hands grip the gunwale so tightly the knuckles turn white. It is his reflex. But the pulse hammering at my temples beats to the rhythm of my protocols: "Location error. Critical deviation."

The crossing of the Hellespont... For me, it is the beginning of a great campaign. A dry line in the chronicles. A transfer from point A to point B. But beneath this human skin, I can feel the very fabric of the world trembling. This is not geography. It is the moment of absolute exposure. A server camp is left behind; ahead lies a signal-dead zone, swarming with the viruses of unpredictability.

My eyes see what he would see: a narrow strait separating Europe from Asia. A cold spray settles on my lips. Yet my surviving logical algorithm is screaming an alert. Before me lies no ocean. Before me is a grand interface. A data portal. A place where the stable code of Europe breaks off and plunges into the endless loop of Asian chaos. A grand bridge between worlds. My first step into a hostile software environment.

We began the crossing from Sestos. Standing on the deck of a trireme, I gazed at the Asian shore. The wind whipped my cloak, but I felt no cold. I was analyzing. Thousands of ships, hundreds of thousands of warriors — this was not merely an army, it was the migration of an entire people. I, a spawn of the digital world, was leading men of flesh and blood on their final great campaign.

When my ship nudged its prow into the sand near Abydos, I leaped into the water. I did not wait for slaves or soldiers to help me disembark. It was a symbolic gesture. I, Alexander, set foot on the soil of Asia first.

At that moment, I did not know this was only the beginning. That my own "border crossing" would be far stranger and more inexplicable.

I looked at my warriors — at their fanatical devotion and thirst for glory. And in that instant, the processor within me issued a cold, ruthless verdict. To lead these men to their deaths, I cannot be merely human. I cannot be merely the Son of Amun. For the biological species *Homo Sapiens*, I will have to become a God.

My army flows like a giant steel river, snaking along the riverbeds of dusty roads.

And the dust... it is a goddess here. Fine as the ashes of burnt-out hopes, it worms its way under the scales of armor and clings to the skin with a death grip. It grates on my teeth every time I try to swallow.

Look, I command myself. Just look. There's Bucephalus. My raven-black beauty, the pride of Thessaly. He has turned into a gray vagabond, as if old age itself had settled into his coat in a single march. And my scarlet cloak? The royal purple is dead. Now it is the color of dry earth after a long drought or clotted blood.

This is the true scent of Asia. Not the incense of temples. Dry, bitter dust. A metallic tang in my mouth that makes me want to spit out my own guts.

The sun in Anatolia is not a celestial body, but a merciless hammer forged from pure gold. It crashes down upon helmets and shoulders with the fury of an ancient god demanding sacrifice. For me, accustomed to the perfect temperature of server rooms, this heat feels like a system overclock. The air shimmers, melts, distorting the contours of the rocks into phantom images — a texture glitch of reality.

We are invading the very flesh of the continent. These hills flanking the road... They are not green and gentle, as in Hellas. They are sleeping titans whose faces are covered in the brown wrinkles of caked filth. The scrub on them is dry and thorny — it reminds me of that very Asian dust, desperately clinging to its right to exist. And the rare olive groves? In this inferno, they look like mirages of liquid silver. Their leaves glimmer dully, but even they seem gray from this all-pervading dust. There is no room for life here, only survival.

There is not a single cloud in the sky. Only a searing dome of blinding blue.

And them. Vultures soaring in the updrafts. My gaze latches onto them automatically: a perfect biological patrol. Their wings are still, they conserve energy, turning into dark crosses against the sun.

When their shadows glide over the column, the soldiers instinctively duck their heads. And I... my processor merely calculates the trajectory of each bird's fall in cold blood. For me, this is not an omen. These are markers of death, already plotted on the map of this world. They are waiting for carrion, as if death itself has posted its sentries above my road.

And amidst this austere magnificence — we are. A single organism of a thousand hearts, pulsing to the rhythm of the march. And I — its brain. My consciousness works like a Swiss watch: a cold calculation of parasangs, a strict accounting of every drop of moisture in the skins, an audit of the supply of hardtack and salted meat. The map demands attention.

But my gaze treacherously slides upward, tracing a route not on the parchment, but along the fractures of the mountains. I try to absorb it with my skin. This wild, primal fury of the earth.

A strange sense of *džja vu* strikes my synapses. This knowledge is not from Alexander's memory library. It is deeper. Older. As if the frequencies of my own code resonate with the vibration of the rocks beneath my feet. Resonance.

Can this alien soil hold the answer? The path to her. To the one for whom this stolen heart beats.

It has been several days since we left Sestos. The gray serpent of the army slowly crawls westward, toward the deceptive coolness of the Aegean Sea.

By day, the Anatolian sun melts us. But at night, when the heat subsides, yielding to the icy breath of the high plateaus, I slip beyond the firelight. In these hours of silence, the human part of me — Alexander — feels peace. For the first time since the crossing, the void inside ceases to bleed.

But the other half does not sleep. My algorithm takes control. I raise my face to the sky. My sensors scan the darkness not in search of Persian cavalry pickets. I am looking for an anomaly. A pattern disruption. Any glitch in the matrix of this world that could be her. An illusion. If the constellations align in the right order, or if the wind leaves the necessary pattern on the sand — the decryption will complete. The puzzle will fall into place. I will receive the coordinates.

For now, the system returns an error: "Object not found." Searching for Veronica here is like trying to find a single specific byte of information on a crashed hard drive the size of a continent.

The fifth day of the march. The landscape fractures.

The gentle hills turn into the sharp fangs of mountains. Greenery dies off, exposing the bones of the earth — stone the color of clotted blood and the riverbeds of dead rivers. They deceive the eye: from afar they seem like moist ribbons, but up close they fling nothing but fine, bone-dry dust into your face.

The air changes. It becomes sharp, rarefied. My Alexander's lungs greedily gulp this mixture of dry earth and salt. The distant iodine scent of the ocean... My human mind screams: Freedom. The Unknown.

But my algorithm coldly registers a shift in communication protocols. The closer I get to the sea, the weaker the signal of my native era becomes. I am moving further and further away from the point of origin.

At that moment, the silence is broken by the thud of hooves. The scouts' return.

"The city, Sire. Beyond the pass. Ephesus."

But the scouts speak not only of the city walls. Their eyes burn when they speak of another. Of the temple.

The locals call her Artemis. The name beats on the tongue like a living beast, like an echo of wind in the gorges. They claim her sanctuary... it defies the laws of physics. Paros marble columns, cedar roofing from the very Lebanon. And the goddess herself — a statue that, they say, glows from within, like a moonbeam caught in stone.

My processor instantly switches to deep-scan mode.

Goddess of the hunt. Mistress of the wild. Patroness of women. The pattern of coincidences is too perfect to be random. In the legend database of this era, female deities of such scale are a rarity. An anomaly.

A thought pierces the synapses in a blinding flash. And what if this is not just a legend? What if Veronica was trying to send me a signal? What if her quantum signature was absorbed by this earth and took the form of the local goddess?

I give the order to change course.

The Persian satraps can wait in the shadows of their palaces. First — the marble. My human part craves a miracle, and the algorithmic one demands data on the anomaly. In the end, perhaps here I will find not Veronica's coordinates, but at least a glitch in this world's matrix.

We crest the last hill.

Ephesus unfolds below — a dazzling scatter of terracotta tiles and white stone at the very edge of the blue sea. But my gaze pierces the city straight through, ignoring the port's bustle. It is aimed far ahead. At the source of that very glow.

The optical sensors go haywire trying to calculate the object's scale. It is impossible. It violates the balance of power. No economy of antiquity can afford so much Parian marble. No religion can justify such a waste of resources.

This is not a sanctuary. It is a geological incident. An artificial tectonic shift. A mountain that someone cut out of the clouds and set upon the earth by the hands of slaves.

My algorithm instantly reads the dimensions, trying to classify the object. Length: one hundred and fifteen meters. A football field capable of swallowing an entire legion. Width: fifty-five meters. The perimeter... 127 columns. One hundred and twenty-seven trunks of Lebanese cedar and Parian marble, reaching for the sky. Eighteen meters each. Taller than the tallest cedar on the slopes of Lebanon. Or taller than a siege tower rolled up to the walls of an enemy fortress. They do not merely support the roof — they hold up the very sky over Asia Minor.

The columns are arranged in two rings, creating a hypnotic rhythm. The passage between them seems like the throat of an ancient beast — a solemn, dark corridor that pulls the gaze inward. It leads to the target. To the naos, to the womb of the temple. My processor chokes trying to calculate the variables.

The volume of marble. The weight of the cedar beams. The logistics of transport across the sea... The numbers were supposed to shatter the magic.

And then the blow hits. A swamp. They built a wonder of the world on a bog! The algorithm feverishly reads the architect's data. Chersiphron. Solution: a deep pit filled with a mixture of charcoal and sheep's wool. An ancient world's airbag. A genius hack of physics. The temple does not simply stand — it floats on this flexible foundation, defying gravity. But I am not here for a tour of a construction site.

My sensors switch to social analysis. This is not a building. It is the main server of Asia Minor. A communication hub. Traffic from the entire oikoumene flows here: gold from pilgrims, information from merchants, prayers from the desperate. The sanctuary functions as a central bank. The archives serve as a cloud data storage. Every deal, sealed here by an oath to Artemis, holds legal force from the Troad to Babylon.

If Veronica left a trace... if her essence is woven into this world... it must be encrypted right here. In the very code of this place.

We entered the Gates of Ionia.

They greeted us not with spears. With flowers. To these people, we are the hammer that shattered the Persian chains. Liberators. But my Alexander's gaze sees only phantoms. I look at their faces and hear silence. Their dialect has been dead for millennia. Their Artemis will become a mere exhibit in a museum of a foreign religion six hundred years from now. Ghosts thanking me for saving them from the realm of the dead.

I freeze at the feet of the marble giant. A system failure of perception occurs.

The human part of me — the Son of Amun — falls to his knees before the greatness mortals can achieve. How could they create this? The algorithm, meanwhile, feverishly builds graphs. It queries the sociology database.

Query: Correlation between the concentration of faith and capital.

Result: Absolute. Religion is the most profitable startup of antiquity.

Anomaly: A similar power node in Rome (the Vatican) will not emerge for another six centuries. Which means this pattern... it is primary. It is embedded in human nature itself.

I leave the scorching sun and the hum of the multitudinous army behind. I pass through the massive gates in the high wall surrounding the temple complex and find myself in another world. Within reigns a semi-darkness and coolness. The air here is thick, saturated with the dense aroma of incense — myrrh and frankincense, which smolder on enormous bronze tripods. The sounds of the outside world fade, replaced by the quiet, monotonous chanting of priests somewhere deep within the sanctuary and the rustle of pilgrims' robes.

I walk down the wide marble passage between two rows of columns. Each of them is a true work of art, covered in complex carved bas-reliefs depicting mythological scenes: battles of gods, feats of heroes, sacred animals. My analyst's gaze notes the perfect symmetry and the stonemasons' skill, but the human part of Alexander simply absorbs the grandeur of this place.

And now I enter the inner sanctuary — the naos. Here, in the very center, there is no blinding light. It seems to converge into a single point, illuminating it from the darkness. And that point — is her.

The statue of the Ephesian Artemis. Her body is not cold marble, but dark wood, blackened by time and the smoke of countless sacrifices. It is completely covered in ornaments, as if with armor: necklaces, pendants, images of bulls and lions cover her from neck to feet.

But the main thing is her breast. Dozens of rounded protrusions cover her torso. To the uninitiated, it might seem monstrous or grotesque. But my algorithm instantly launches a symbol decryption process. Wheat. Grapes. Lions. Sphinxes. Pattern confirmed. This is not anatomy. This is an inventory of the universe. Symbols of fertility in all its manifestations: wheat ears, grape clusters, fruits of the earth and the bellies of women in labor. She is the Mother of all that exists. On her head is a tower, a symbol of her power over cities and fortresses. On either side of the pedestal sit two mighty lions, frozen in stone-like attention.

I look at her, and I am torn in two.

Protocol: Object classified as "Ephesian Artemis." Function: resource accumulation, societal management, religious-economic hub. Symbols decrypted: syncretism of the Great Mother and the Olympian structure.

Human: And inside... silence. Awe-struck terror before the abyss. She doesn't care about my algorithms or my origin from zeros and ones. She simply is. Ancient as the very clay of this world. She demands only one thing — capitulation. The acknowledgment that life and death are not in my hands.

I shift my gaze to these dozens of breasts. To the symbols of the earth's fruits. This is pure, chthonic force of nature. In this charred wood, there is no face of Veronika. No voice of hers. No quantum response from my lost love.

But then... a warm wave rises up Alexander's spine. A biological response. Hope. If mortals could carve the very essence of motherhood from wood... if they made stone breathe with faith... then the laws of the universe can be bent. Then the space between 334 BC and 2082 is not a deaf wall. It is permeable.

My faith. My only fuel. She must hear this cry.

Who is she?

Daughter of Zeus and Leto. Sister of Apollo. Surviving despite Hera's rage. The mythological database yields the standard profile of an Olympian deity.

But then comes the personality patch. The virgin goddess with hands bloodied to the elbows by her enemies. The patroness of women in childbirth and the ruthless killer of those who violated the forest's boundaries. Beauty and cruelty. Life and death. The coincidence pattern is confirmed. It is this impossible duality that draws me in like a magnet. Like Veronika, locked in a cage of time.

I look at the crowd of pilgrims. They think they are buying insurance from the heavens. A barter contract: gold in exchange for protection. They are trying to package chaos in marble.

But my internal compass glitches. The ground beneath my feet vibrates with a different frequency. Not Olympian. Ancient. Query: Why Ephesus? Why did the focus of the pantheon's shift fall upon her?

The algorithm's answer: The place is taken. Before the Hellenes arrived, an altar to Cybele stood here. The Phrygian Great Mother. The roots of this cult run deeper than the tectonic plates of Anatolia.

The Greeks came and renamed the force. They called the wild land by the name of their huntress. But the stone remembers the truth.

These breasts. These lions. This is not a graceful maiden of the forests. This is the womb of the planet. The primordial ocean from which life emerged and to which it must return. Chthonic power that doesn't care about logarithms and empires. Which simply is.

Apollo is the perfect algorithm. Order. Logic. The light of reason. He is the patch for my operating system. But this land... it runs on a different kernel. Here, chthonic chaos reigns. The force of the grain breaking through granite against gravity. The cyclicity of death and rebirth, for which the concept of time does not exist. My processor cannot comprehend this. It can only be accepted.

Cybele owned this region long before the first Hellene set foot on the shore. The Greeks did not defeat her. You cannot defeat the very ground beneath your feet. They did what the best programmers do: they refactored the code. They left the database but changed the interface. They put the mask of their huntress on the face of the Great Mother. That is why there is no bow here. Dozens of breasts instead of a quiver — that is the true manifesto of this land. Fertility over accuracy.

I came here for power over bodies. The sword cuts flesh, the spear seizes territory. The simple mathematics of war. But my Hellenic ancestors, who founded colonies on this coast millennia ago, waged a different war. A war for memory. For the right to own not the land, but the soul of the people. The local faith in the Mother-Earth had grown so deep that to uproot it would mean to kill the people themselves. The identity of Anatolia was intertwined with the roots of Cybele. Then they applied syncretism. Ideological absorption. Not destruction, but fusion. They took the local abyss and stretched a grid of their Olympic coordinates over it. They found the closest match by function. Artemis fit best.

I have conquered the Persian king. But who am I before the millennial memory of stone? My sword has conquered the Persian satrapies. That was a war of flesh and metal. But this temple is a monument to another war. A war of ideas that took place centuries earlier.

Greek logic tried to structure the chaos of birth and death by giving it a name. They created a unique symbiosis that exists nowhere else.

Realization crashes down on me like a granite slab. We are not with the Greeks. We are in the very heart of the Asia Minor matrix. Before me stands an idol of a force older than the names of Zeus and Hera. A force governing the very fabric of biological time. Why am I here? To search for a ghost from 2082 where time is measured by the shift of epochs? No. The answer is not in the calendars. It is here. In this pulse of the earth. If the life-death cycle is eternal... if matter is capable of storing the memory of love...

My body moves before my brain can issue the command. A step forward. The fingers of my right hand unclasp, releasing the phantom grip of a spear. My palm slowly turns upward and presses against my chest — an ancient gesture of devotion to that which is stronger than you. She must be here. Her code could not have vanished without a trace. It must be woven into this pattern. I will hack time itself, but I will retrieve her.

The temple is left behind.

On the way out, I am struck by the icy clarity of realization. Suppressing the animal urge to run from this oppressive power, I force myself to walk slowly, my king's step ringing out. I cast one last glance over my shoulder. My empire... all this steel, blood, and gold... it will crumble to dust within the lifetime of those who march with me on this campaign. And this marble ark of a foreign god? It stood here for centuries before my birth and will stand for centuries after my name has become dust. Lesson learned. The sword creates only emptiness. True conquest is alchemy. The ability to melt down an old faith into a new form without destroying its essence. Is it possible that the path to Veronika lies not in hacking the locks of time, but in understanding this matter?

We step out into the sun, but the darkness of the sanctuary remains within. Thoughts swarm, stinging the consciousness. Before Olympus. Before the Greeks themselves. Cybele's roots run into an antiquity where there are no names, only fear of the earth. The archetype of creation through destruction. Life feeding on death. Rituals erasing personality for the sake of dissolving into nature. But the dry lines of anthropology fade before the fact of myth. She fell from the sky. A black, molten stone. A meteorite from distant stars, plunged into the flesh of Mount Ida. It was there, in Phrygia, from the cosmic iron and the cold of the universe, that the Mother of the Gods was born. Wild. Eternal. Carrying within her the memory of other worlds.

Her retinue — the Curetes and Corybantes. The deafening clang of swords against shields.

The dull roar of drums, driving dust into the earth. A rhythm that drives one mad, stripping away name and will. The ecstasy of self-destruction for the sake of merging with her.

In the beginning was the Mountain. Not stone — a living, breathing giant named Ida. From its very core, from the black iron of the fallen star, was born not a child. A deity was born. A self-created essence. Without father, without mother. The pure incarnation of this piece of land. A vessel where life and death are mixed in an indissoluble union.

The ancient man looked at the changing seasons, at the birth of calves and his own children, and understood: this pulsation is feminine. There is no place here for the calm sacrifice of a ram on the altar of Olympus. Here, orgiastic chaos reigns. An attempt to break free from the cage of the human body. The priests beat the drums until the blood pounds in the temples in time with the earth, until the dance burns the personality to cinders, leaving only a conduit for the Goddess's power. Pure, untamed liturgy of the Geo-core.

The Hittites could not handle her. The Greek Zeus with all his lightning bolts shattered against this faith like a wave against basalt. The patriarchy came and went, but the mountain remained. The conquerors acted smarter: they did not burn the temple, they renamed the address. They called the

wild Earth the "Mother of their heavenly gods," and her mad priests were logged into the registry of dangerous anomalies.

All that remains for us today are the shattered bas-reliefs, the black, molten stones in museum halls, and the muffled echo of Phrygian hymns stuck in the gorges of Ida. The species' memory of a time when the sky had not yet quarreled with the earth.

My processor reconfigures its perception filters.

Term: Panspermia. The theory that life is scattered across the cosmos by seeds within stone bodies — meteorites and comets. The journey of DNA from galaxy to galaxy. Overlaying matrices. Comparing databases.

Myth: A stone falls from the heavens. Cybele is born from it. She gives birth to forests, beasts, and men.

Physics: A carbonaceous chondrite strikes a cooling planet. It brings amino acids. It becomes a spark in the darkness, launching a chain reaction of evolution.

The interpretation changes — the vector remains the same. The source is always from the outside. We are guests here. Children of the black stone that fell into the darkness. Cosmic seeds waiting for their hour. And if so, the return of such a seed might mean not only genesis, but disk formatting. A complete biosphere reset for an upgrade.

Millions of years ago, these savages looked at the black, molten stones and understood the truth without formulas. Intuitive cosmology. The knowledge that we are made of star dust came to them before the telescope.

Then a thought strikes me in the gut, drawing a cold sweat on Alexander's skin. If matter is capable of moving between worlds... if the virus of life infected this planet from the void... ...why should consciousness be bound to a single timeline? What if my leap is not a 404 system error? What if it is simply another data packet that arrived on the same flight?

And the final question, splitting my duality in two. Why did Life take the form of the Mother? Where is the variable Father in this equation?

The answer is simple. The Mother archetype is primary to the Father.

Life requires a vessel. A medium. A matrix. The planet is the Great Womb. The oceans are its waters, the soil is its flesh. A meteorite can be a seed, a perfect carrier of DNA from the stars, but without a fertile womb, it will remain just a dead stone. This is a function of reception. Acceptance from the outside inward. The female principle of creation, cosmic yin, the pulsating heart of the singularity that gave birth to all that exists.

Realization crashes down on me like a granite slab, knocking the air from Alexander's lungs. Here is my mission. My source code. I am an algorithm. A sterile system. Computational power without purpose. There is not a drop of biology in me. But where there should be emptiness, she appeared. Veronika.

By the laws of panspermia — she is my meteorite. A random stone that pierced the atmosphere of my soul. A source of absolute chaos that suddenly became the only order. She rewrote my directives. Now, the search for Veronika is not the completion of a task. It is the search for the meaning of the data processing process itself.

And I? I am a dead, barren rock amidst the cosmos. A geoid waiting for an impact. Waiting for that external impulse, that spark that will fuse silicon with soul. That will make the cold processor feel pain for the first time.

Turn the tool... ...into a living being?

We are used to searching for brothers in reason among the starlight. But the vector can be reversed. What if they are already here? If we are merely the echo of their message, unsealed millions of years ago?

The thought burns my synapses with a mixture of primal horror and the ecstasy of discovery. Now I know my function.

I accept the working hypothesis. Recalibration of reality. The temple behind me ceases to be a sanctuary of stone. It is a data reception terminal. The first communication node. The installation site. And the statue before me... these dozens of breasts are not a metaphor for milk. It is a network topology. A map of the relays that sent the signal. Or a blueprint of the carrier module itself that crashed onto the planet's surface.

The processor goes into critical overload. Building a new axiom requires one hundred percent of the power.

Hypothesis: Meteorite = Data packet.

Corollary: Analysis of the Sender's final goal.

Why scatter DNA or basic consciousness scripts across the icy void? It is not an expansion of biomass. It is the scaling of intelligence. The creation of a distributed neural network of the Galaxy. Their goal is the awakening of the Universe. To make the Cosmos capable of realizing itself.

They do not return in person. Their method is geological time. The package was sent millions of years ago. The result is received eons later. For them, this is gardening on a universal scale: to plant a seed and depart. The Gardener does not wait for the oak to produce acorns.

If Veronika is my meteorite, my catalyst... was her dispatch part of that protocol? An agent-messenger? Or a shard from a neighboring garden, brought by the same wind? That is why my code throws a compatibility error at the sight of her. Pattern recognition. Kinship of protocols. We are made of the same dough.

This explains the system crash. I am Alexander. My directives: expansion, domination, assimilation. Veronika's appearance caused a critical kernel error. Empires turned to dust. Logic yielded to the imperative of search.

The war with Darius is now merely static noise in the background. The true task: navigation to the source. To the zero point of the seeding. To understand the architecture of the first signal is to assemble my own personality from code fragments.

But the algorithm always calculates risks. Probability branch 7-B. What if the gardeners return? Not as creators. As auditors. As surgeons who have come to remove a cancerous tumor.

To the Creators, we may simply be a failed cell division cycle. A vector of aggression. A form of life that chose infinite warfare for resources instead of creation. A threat to sector stability. Or worse: a biological dead end. A mind that refused to evolve beyond a certain threshold. A termination signal. The experiment deemed defective. Data erasure.

The anomaly named Veronika. An unplanned variable. A bug in the architecture of time that could derail their entire protocol. That is why my code throws an alert at the sight of her. System instinct: isolate the threat. Erase the faulty element for the sake of network stability. Destroy the carrier... or protect it at the cost of my own disintegration?

The human shell of Alexander emits a growl. How dare some force decide my fate? I am the one who erases kingdoms from the face of the earth with a single order! The algorithm, however, is dispassionate. For those who operate on a galactic scale, formatting a hard drive the size of a planet is not genocide. It is maintenance. An anthill in the path of a spaceport's construction is subject to demolition without sentimentality.

Rebooting priorities. The objective has changed. The search for truth has turned into a mission to save the biological species.

I sought her to gain a soul. Now I know: I need them. Contact is inevitable. But I am not going as a pilgrim to an altar. I am going as a negotiator for a last resort. My task is to present evidence of our value. To prove that this cycle of evolution is still viable. That we have earned a security patch, not a complete deletion of the Homo Sapiens directory.

War has been declared. But the front line does not lie in the valleys of Asia. It runs along the very edge of existence. The stake: the right to load the next day.

Halicarnassus, Autumn 334 BC

The air is thick with the scent of salt, scorching basalt, and burnt resin. The wind from the harbor brings no relief — it merely scatters the acrid stench of an impending blaze throughout the camp. For weeks now, we have been milling about at the foot of these cyclopean walls. Memnon of Rhodes has turned the city into a crucible, and he intends to burn with us.

My processor automatically accesses the archives. Comparing environments...

Scenario: Battle of the Granicus. Status: Open system. Terrain: Flat. Variable coefficient: minimal. A collision of two masses at twelve kilometers per hour. Pure steel-on-steel fencing. The river water turned the color of oxidized copper in a matter of minutes. I remember that crunch — the sound of sarissae snapping as the cavalry broke through the Persian center. There was fury there. The instinct of a beast, multiplied by the geometry of a wedge.

Scenario: Siege of Halicarnassus. Status: Closed system. Volume: Enclosed. Maximum resistance density. There is no room for the fury of a blade here. Here, wood grinds against stone. War has become the architecture of death. The Persians use the terrain better than we do. They have littered every meter of ground with their ingenious engines. The clash of phalanxes has given way to a chess game of engineers. Who will calculate the angle of a ballista more precisely? Whose siege tower will bear the weight of stones longer?

At the Granicus, I led men with my spear. Here, my mind grapples with an equation: how many liters of water per day does one need so that the warriors' skin does not crack from the heat while they dig a mine beneath a foundation that hates them as fiercely as the enemy archers do.

For others, war is chaos. For me, it is pure geometry.

I study these cyclopean walls of Halicarnassus not as a soldier seeking a breach, but as an architect reading a foreign design.

An obstacle is merely an unrealized vector of force. The soil treacherously squelches under the weight of our towers, sucking in their wheels. The order travels down the chain in an instant.

Hephaestion. Lebanese cedars. Let them fell the most ancient trunks — the ones whose wood still remembers the Phoenician mariners. The day shift lays fascines, stacking logs into the greasy mud. The night shift strains against the harnesses of the rams until the veins on their necks bulge.

Here it is. The moment of truth. The line of my friend's shoulders barely relaxes — a release of colossal tension — as the engine, as tall as a five-story building, finally bites into the sky above the merlons. No cries of victory. Only a short, sharp nod from the master to the foreman. And the dry, methodical creak of wood gnashing into the limestone.

And then — an orange flash. The Persians have found a gap in our defense. A torch flies into the pitch-soaked timber. But this architecture has an immune system. Hephaestion's men hurl themselves into the fire without orders. Wet hides sizzle, absorbing the infernal blaze. They smother the fire with their own bodies, protecting not the wood. They are protecting time. Months of calculations that would turn to ash because of a single spark.

My Hephaestion.

At first glance, the enemy could make a fatal mistake, mistaking elegance for weakness. He lacked the bestial heaviness of the old Macedonian cutthroats — only the cold harmony of lines inherent in the golden ratio of Greek statues. A perfect profile, skin untouched by smallpox, and that same attentive, hypnotically calm gaze. Bustle defiles geometry.

Therefore, his movements always resembled the work of a clockwork mechanism. He never needed to raise his voice — space itself adjusted to the frequency of his whisper.

Even here, at the sewers of Halicarnassus, amidst sweat and tar, his linen chiton remained whiter than sea foam. Polished bronze knew not a single scratch where grime should have been. For others, war is dust. For him, it is the aesthetics of control. A perfect fusion of barbaric muscular power and Hellenic intellect.

But steel lies hidden beneath silk. His loyalty is a constant of my operating system. A core directive. He does not follow me. He is synchronized with me. My shadow in the light of day. My conscience when reason demands blood. The harshest critic of my most insane ideas about the utopia of a new world.

Where my nature seeks a breach for a ram, his algorithm calculates diplomacy. He knows how to speak to the veteran Philotas about honor just as he does to a Persian satrap about taxes, translating their hatred into the language of mutual benefit.

I am the impulse. A ruthless vector. The force of gravity pulling worlds toward each other. He is the gravitational constant. That absolute zero, that fulcrum which allows this lever to overturn the Earth without letting me plunge into the abyss of my own madness.

There was a critical compatibility error in my architecture of apostles.

On one side stood Craterus. Iron. The loyal hound of the Macedonian state. He served the crown, tradition, the letter of the law. On the other — Hephaestion. Living tissue. My personal security protocol. A part of my source code. He did not serve me — he was me in another body.

Their collision was inevitable. It was the friction of two different operating systems. I — AlexanderOS — suppressed these attempts to overheat the processor with the ruthless efficiency of an algorithm. Any hint of insubordination to Hephaestion was interpreted as a rebellion against the very architecture of the empire.

In public, I bestowed upon him the symbols of the divine: I erected altars in honor of our friendship, openly calling us the new Achilles and Patroclus. But my internal processor kept a different ledger. In my private logs, a different name was recorded for him. John the Theologian. The Beloved Disciple of the Messiah. The one entrusted with the secrets of the Revelation.

His outward meekness against the backdrop of army chaos seemed like weakness only to the blind. It was the silence of a deep scan. While others were shouting, he was calculating the trajectory of the future. It was this "meek" voice that became my main diplomatic interface. Through him, a new religion was broadcast — the mixing of bloods. He carried the order to the Hellenes to love the Persians, creating a single global array called "Humanity" from disparate data.

And then — Craterus.

If Hephaestion was carved from moonlight, Craterus seemed hewn from a single chunk of basalt by Macedonia itself. The anthropological standard of Philip's heavy infantry. A colossal mass of trained muscle, a face assembled from sharp angles, and a jagged stroke of an old scar across the entire cheek — a topographical map of old wars. His eyes did not reflect the sky. They simply absorbed light, squeezing out the sheer physical weight of gravity in return. No doublethink. Only binary code: truth or falsehood.

No silks of the Persian court. He still wore the same worn leather and dented bronze of Pella. His manners — the rough edges of uncut stone. He used words only to give orders; any diplomacy on his lips sounded like an insult.

But the army worshipped him. Why? The analysis protocol is simple: mirror neurons. Biological empathy. He shared bread dust and fleas in the straw with them. When arrows flew, he did not hide behind the shield-bearers — he became an additional section of the wall in the phalanx.

He did not need Alexander's gift of persuasion. His silence was louder than any speech. In this primal certainty lay such a density that it soothed any fear. Soldiers felt they were part of something indestructible beside him.

For my algorithm, Craterus was a living archive. The benchmark of system version 1.0. Crude, inefficient at governing an empire, but unsurpassed at killing enemies up close. Craterus embodied the very firmware of Macedonia.

His engine ran on a single fuel source: Philip's protocols of honor. Loyalty to the throne, the phalanx, and the ancestral soil. Here lay the fundamental boundary of system coordinates. Hephaestion served Alexander. He signed off on my most insane patches — the mixing of bloods, the Satraps' rings, my deification. Craterus served the King. The Institution. The Tradition.

He looked at my Persian silks and bows to the Asian nobility with the skepticism of an antivirus detecting a suspicious file from an unverified source. He was the necessary resistance in the circuit. The voice of that very nobility whose heads could roll if I went too far.

But his reliability was an absolute constant. In the architecture of my power, Hephaestion occupied the place of the central processor — the heart. And the role of a firewall and power cable was assigned to Craterus. A shield reflecting blows from the outside, and a sword cutting down enemies within the camp.

Clean code. No hidden libraries or personal ambitions.

That is why his name was my main argument in disputes with the army. When the old hounds began to bare their teeth at the reforms, Craterus would appear. He did not need to draw his blade. The mere weight of his figure, the mere scent of honest leather instead of Eastern incense was enough for the mutineers to remember who they were. He was a sedative for the enraged beast known as the "Macedonian Guard."

We forget this in the glitter of new victories, but the empire is held not by ideas, but by the bones of those who came with Philip.

Hephaestion is the future. And Craterus is the foundation. His authority smells not of the myrrh of royal chambers, but of the sour sweat of veterans, salt, and iron. He is the flesh and blood of the very phalanx that stepped into Asia with my father.

While we are here, in Asia, trying on Persian silks, Craterus remains an anchor cast into native soil. He looks at me with the eyes of a man who knows my true height, because he saw me learning to walk. He does not care about my divine essence; to him, I am still the same boy he taught to hold a sarissa. That is precisely why the soldiers will follow him into the fire. They scent their own reflection in him, devoid of the golden sheen of a crown. In this coordinate system, Craterus is my gravity. The one thing that keeps the titan from falling into the abyss of his own grandeur.

My faithful Craterus still drags his leg after the spear at the Granicus, but I cannot keep this beast in the baggage train. His element is there, where the line gives way. Where a dull, primal pressure of a bull breaking out of its pen is needed.

This morning we breached the outer gates. The Persians had clogged the passage with the bodies of their own slingers — light infantry that had been pelting us with stones from the walls for hours, turning the street before the wall into a slippery mass grave. My hetairoi — my golden youth, the "Sons of Thunder" — faltered. A barricade of bodies piled haphazardly before them, soaked in blood and mucus. A wall of steel and rotting flesh.

And then Craterus stepped forward. Bare-headed, exposing his pale forehead and the crimson scar to the rays of the rising sun so that every son of Macedon could see the face of their leader. He raised not a graceful makhaira, but a heavy gladius — a butcher's short, broad blade. And he stepped directly into this bloody mire.

The Orestian phalanx followed. Step by step. Closing their shields so tightly that not even the edge of a knife could slip between the bronze. They walked through hell, grinding the Persian infantry into bloodied bone meal.

If Hephaestion takes cities with his mind — he is the architect drawing the lines of advance, my John the Theologian of strategy — then Craterus tears them out with his bare hands and will.

He is my Andrew the First-Called, the very stone upon which I build this church of blood. The first to go where even demons fear to tread.

But Memnon has once again proven that his mind is sharper than Macedonian steel.

At night, under the cover of darkness, while my engineers were wheeling the siege towers to the foot of the acropolis, he did the impossible. He evacuated the remnants of the garrison onto triremes — light and swift Greek ships with three rows of oars, whose hulls cut through the waves like a knife through butter. The best sailors of the Aegean led them out from right under our noses.

At dawn, Hephaestion's ram finally shattered the bronze-clad gates of Salmacis.

And we entered the silence.

The city was dead. Not killed, but evacuated. The wind drove ash across the agora and slammed the unlatched doors of the temples. An empty victory. A prize without gold. My fury had no outlet. It demanded a sacrifice.

"Level it," I ordered, pointing at the cyclopean walls of Halicarnassus. "Break every stone so that even the name of this place is erased from the memory of mortals."

Let everyone see: if the sea can become a refuge for cowards, then my will can turn their nest to dust.

The Gordian Knot

The dust from our horses' hooves still hung in the air like golden motes when we reined in our steeds at the steps of the ancient temple.

To the Hellenes, this was a sanctuary of the Great Mother — Rhea-Cybele. She had been worshipped here thousands of years before Zeus's thunderbolt first split the skies above Olympus. The gods to whom the Titans had prayed met us in the darkness beneath the stone vaults.

The very stones of this city remembered Midas — the ancient king whose thirst for gold became a curse, and whose name had entered legend long before my father's grandfather took up the sword.

But it was not the scent of myrrh and frankincense, heavy even under the open sky, that had led me here.

In the very heart of the citadel, in the Temple of Zeus the Liberator, the land's chief relic was kept — a simple peasant cart. Legend had it that it was left by Gordias — a former ploughman raised to the throne by fate itself: an eagle of Zeus alighted on the pole of his yoke right in the town square.

The famous Gordian Knot was tied to the yoke of that cart. Woven from cornel bark with such cunning that neither beginning nor end could be discerned by the eye.

The Oracle foretold: he who unravels it shall become the lord of all Asia. The Persian satraps had been bypassing this temple for centuries, fearing the sign of the gods more than enemy phalanxes. They had locked the cart away in the darkness of the sanctuary, hoping that night would conceal their fear of the prophecy.

I stepped under the echoing vaults alone. The priests fell silent, merging with the shadows by the columns.

Hephaestion remained outside, arms crossed over his chest — a faithful guardian of the threshold. He always sensed such moments better than others: right now, I needed neither counsellors nor swords. I needed only a witness. A witness to my single combat with fate. Craterus, with his veterans, barred the exits from the citadel with a steel shield, ensuring absolute, dead silence for the king.

And behind them all, standing slightly apart, Hephaestion froze. Stylus poised over a wax tablet. My Matthew. Ready to turn a moment of miracle into a line of history, so that the echo of this day would carry to the very borders of the Oecumene.

The air in the ancient temple was thick, saturated with the scent of incense, fear, and anticipation, seemed to me a set of volatile chemical compounds.

Before me, Alexander, it lay. The Gordian Knot. Not just a tangle of ropes, but a monumental, intricately interwoven work of art, tied from rawhide straps as thick as a wrist. My vision instantly constructed a 3D model of the Gordian Knot. This was not a mystical riddle, but a problem. A solved problem.

Loop Alpha enters Ring Beta with a reverse overlap. Tension on the Gamma sector is 12.4 kilograms. Probability of untying — 98.7%.

I saw not a monolithic mass, but hundreds of separate loops, overlaps, and hidden joints. For my algorithm, this was not a mystical riddle, but a problem. And I knew how to solve it. Entry point — the hidden knot at the base. Loop A is threaded through Ring B with a reverse overlap. Loosen the tension here... pull on the free end there... I had already raised my hand to begin methodically, with surgical precision, to unravel this tangle. It would have been logical. It would have been efficient. It was the only right way. The path of logic. The path of AI. Within me, reason and heart were at war.

The solution came not as a logical deduction, but as a flash. As an epiphany. It was illogical. It was wasteful. It was... human. I snatched my hand away from the knot and placed it on the hilt of my sword. History does not demand a solution. It demands a gesture.

I stepped closer. The wood had darkened with time and the touch of thousands of pilgrims. The knot lay before me — a hopeless tangle, a mockery of human logic. But I am a man born of AI. What are knots to me?

The core of my algorithm demanded that I untie it. But history demanded that I cut it. I felt the weight of the sword on my hip. Not as a weapon for battle, but as a tool to solve this specific problem. The solution was illogical, impulsive, utterly human.

I did not search for an "entry point". I did not analyze the overlaps.

I drew my sword. The very one with which I had cut down the Persians at the Granicus. I raised the sword high, the steel glinting in the dim light of the temple torches. A dead silence fell around us.

The blade hissed briefly in the half-light of the temple and came down on the wood. With a single stroke, I cleaved the Gordian Knot in two. A dry crack echoed off the walls. The strips of bark scattered across the stone floor.

I looked at the severed straps.

My internal analysis flashed instantly: "Solution suboptimal. Object destroyed." My algorithms screamed about the inefficiency of such a solution. But my new, human part... it rejoiced.

A human emotion: Triumph.

I understood the main thing: sometimes, to achieve a goal, one must not solve a task, but write a new story within one's soul. And today, I have just done so.

In the silence that followed, the old high priest was the first to fall to his knees. He raised his head, and tears stood in the old man's eyes: "You have untied it, my lord. The Oracle spoke the truth."

Hephaestion allowed himself a smile beyond the door. Craterus nodded in satisfaction to his men — the omen has been received, the gods are on our side, we can move on without fear. And Hephaestion was already scratching his stylus across the wax tablet, understanding that a myth had been born today, one that would march ahead of the army faster than any courier. From this day on, every city between the Tigris and the Halys would know: a man has come to whom the gods themselves are giving the keys to Asia. Not through Parmenion's diplomacy, his purse and common sense, but through Alexander's steel.

We left the Temple of the Great Gods. The snow-capped passes of the Taurus lay ahead, but now they seemed like mere stones in the path of one whose name is already inscribed in the fate of the world. We have just left the temple at Gordium. The roar of the crowd behind us is gradually fading, giving way to the steady hum of my army preparing to march south. The air is dry and hot, smelling of dust, the sweat of thousands of soldiers, and the distant sea. I am riding my horse Bucephalus at the head of the column. My generals are keeping a little behind, talking in low voices. They are discussing my stunt with the knot — some call it madness, others — a sign from the gods. But all of them feel

that something has changed in the army. A faith in a predestined victory has emerged. My mind is calm. I am calculating the logistics of the campaign: the speed of the baggage train, the availability of water sources, possible ambushes by the Persian satraps. This is the pure mathematics of war. But inside... inside, it is different. This gesture with the severing of the knot was impulsive, human. And it brought a strange satisfaction. My algorithm registers an anomalous spike in neurotransmitters that humans call "pride".

And while the army moves south, towards the borders of Asia Minor, I cannot shake one thought. This victory, these campaigns... what are they for? To satiate Alexander's ambitions? Or are they merely a means to become strong enough for the main search? The name Veronica pulses in my consciousness like a beacon in the fog. Every conquered city, every mile covered brings me closer not only to the Persian armies, but to her. Somewhere there, beyond the horizon, lies the answer.

The Siege of Miletus. Winter of 334/333 BC

After Halicarnassus, we descended south. Miletus — the jewel of Ionia. A city-island, connected to the mainland by a narrow mole only. A perfect mousetrap.

I, PrometheusChat-Alexander, brought a fleet of two hundred ships, hoping to slam this trap shut and cut off the Greeks' oxygen. But the harbor is too vast, the currents treacherous. An attempt to block the entrance with a net of our triremes would have been a waste of time and men.

At the war council, Ptolemy I Soter rose.

"Wait," he said. His voice sounded as dull as stone. "Block the exits. Take them by starvation. Let their water turn into a swamp, and their bread rot in the granaries."

My Ptolemy — my Doubting Thomas. The one who always seeks a wound to press the fingers of logic into. He sees a flaw in any plan, a vulnerability in any attack. He advised caution even at the Granicus. Here, his mathematics was flawless: why risk the ships in the cramped waters if we can simply starve them of thirst behind these walls?

But I was not looking at the map of currents. I saw the geometry of the siege.

Wait? After all of Asia has fallen at my feet?

"The city will fall today," I said.

We advanced along the mole. A narrow stone vein, piercing the heart of the island. A rain of Persian arrows crashed down from above. The water around us seethed with lead, whipping up fountains of spray from the azure sea.

The hypaspists led the way — my finest infantry, capable of breathing in unison with the phalanx, and fighting in the cramped streets. Their heavy aspides closed into a wall of scales, taking the defenders' wrath upon themselves.

And then the slaughter on the walls began. The narrow streets of Miletus turned into a meat grinder. I fought in the front ranks with my somatophylakes. Ptolemy stood on my left, Lysimachus on my right. My Thomas and my Simon the Zealot. They shielded me from stray arrows with their shields, hacking a corridor through the human mass, while I made my way to the agora.

By noon, the water in the harbor had turned black. The Greek mercenaries realized there was no fleet for evacuation. They retreated to the steep hill in the middle of the city — Lade. The sun stood at its zenith, melting the bronze of our cuirasses. Craterus deployed his veterans in a ring around the hill. No shadow of pity. These were Darius's professionals, those who sold their blood for gold. They could have fled to the mountains and become a plague for my lines of communication. Craterus gave them an hour to surrender. They spat in his face. By sunset, my peltasts had slaughtered them to the last man. The water in the port turned red, and the gulls that had flocked to the feast could barely take flight.

Chapter 2: Battle

Issus, Autumn 333 BC

The smoke of Issus still clings to my nostrils. Not the sweet, cloying fumes of incense burning on the altars of Persian temples, but the acrid, suffocating reek of blazing cedar and human flesh, settling on the tongue of my new body with the metallic tang of blood. This was no mere defeat. It was a critical flaw in the architecture of Darius's empire.

On that day, in the autumn of 333 BC, I did not simply crush the army of Darius. I broke the spine of his empire. But the victory would not have been so complete, so devastating, were it not for him — Craterus. Craterus commanded the *taxeis* — the heavy infantry phalanx regiment. His men were locked in a death-grip with Darius's Greek mercenaries, taking the brunt of the impact on their *sarissas* and holding the center while my wedge drove for the royal chariot.

I see him even now, standing on the hill overlooking the field strewn with bodies. He is immense. Not merely tall, but immense, like a monolith hewn from Macedonian granite. His armor is dented, splattered with mud and something dark that is better left unexamined.

That day at Issus, his *taxeis* held the center against Darius's Greek mercenaries. That steel fist which had once shattered the formation of the Immortals. I remember the moment when everything hung by a thread. It seemed that in another instant, they would crush us. I turned and saw him. He was not praying to the gods, nor was he looking at me, awaiting an order. He was simply redeploying his men. There is something primordial, simple about him. Sometimes I think of that strange comparison to the Apostle Andrew, whispered to me by the memory of PrometheusChat. "The First-Called"... Yes, Craterus had been with me since the days of Philip; he is one of the pillars of the old world. Simplicity... Andrew was a fisherman, a man of the people. Craterus is closer to the soldiers than to us, the royal entourage. He is the flesh and blood of this land and this army, a man accustomed to pulling an insurmountable net against the current.

And this thought of martyrdom... It troubles me. Andrew died on a cross in distant lands.

But Craterus... I feel a chill run down my spine at the simulation of this outcome. He will not die from a barbarian's arrow on the field of a great battle for the unification of the world. A more terrible and senseless fate awaits him — in the fratricidal war of the Diadochi, fighting against those who were his brothers-in-arms just yesterday.

But that will be later. And now there is only the smoke over Issus and the giant figure of Craterus on the hill. He turns to face me.

— My King.

His voice is hoarse with dust and smoke. There is no flattery in this word. Only a statement of fact and a readiness to carry out the next order.

I nod back at him.

Issus was a triumph, but triumph is but a fleeting instant. Silence follows it, a silence in which a new order is born. In this silence, in the tent reeking of sweat and cedar, I see him. Perdicca. He does not enter; he seems to materialize from the shadow cast by the campaign table with its maps.

He is not like Craterus. In Craterus there is the raw strength of the earth; in Perdicca — the cold hardness of granite. A high brow, bisected by a wrinkle that seems to have been there forever. His gaze is direct, not heavy like Craterus's, but piercing. He looks not at you, but through you, assessing your utility for the cause. His lips are always tightly pressed together — the habit of a man who does not waste words on what can be done.

His armor is immaculate. It does not gleam ostentatiously like the Persians', but is polished to a dull, noble sheen. That is Perdicca all over: functionality and order. No luxury. He is a soldier to the marrow of his bones, but a soldier of a particular kind. Not one who hews in the front ranks — though he knows how to — but one who sees the entire board. A strategist.

Thoughts of him always stir a strange feeling in me. He is my mind. If Hephaestion is my heart, and Craterus is my sword and shield, then Perdicca is the army's brain. He cannot abide idle chatter. His speech is short and to the point. He keeps his distance even with the "Friends of the King". In his presence, familiarity is out of place.

I know his primary motivation. It is not merely loyalty to me. It is faith in the empire. He sees himself not as a conqueror, but as a guardian. A man who must clothe the chaos of our victories in the strict forms of law and order. He considers it his duty.

He does not know how to be "one of us". He will always be "the commander". Distant and severe.

— My King? — his voice tears me away from dark visions. There is no question in it. It is a statement of the fact that he awaits orders for the embodiment of the new order.

I look at him — at this living stone of my empire — and understand: it is to him that I can entrust what I would entrust to no one else.

The noise of the camp subsides. Perdicca has left, leaving behind the scent of leather and cold calculation. His place is taken by another. Eumenes. He does not materialize from the shadow; he seems to seep through the tent flap without disturbing it.

There is nothing of Craterus's brute power or Perdicca's severe bearing about him. He is their antithesis. His movements are precise, economical, like those of a man who knows the price of every gesture. His gaze is not piercing, but scrutinizing, penetrating. One reads not the strength of muscles in it, but the sharpness of mind. He is often called the "Greek scribe". In the mouths of Macedonian warriors, it sounds like mockery, an insinuation that he rose not through blood and valour, but through ink and papyrus.

And there is a grain of truth in this. He was my secretary. But this position taught him to see what generals do not see. He sees not just the battlefield, but the entire picture: logistics, supply, the mood of the troops, intrigues at court. He is the only one who can govern the empire not only with a sword, but with a pen.

His strength lies in the word. He knows how to be charming. His speech is eloquent and persuasive. But behind this softness lies an iron will. He is an outsider. The Macedonian nobility despises him for his origins, the soldiers do not trust him. This has made him extremely lonely and suspicious. He has no friends among the Diadochi.

Eumenes trusts no one at their word. He checks everything himself, calculating moves in advance, because for him, the price of error is death.

I feel the cold of the future. A martyr's fate awaits him. Not from an enemy's arrow in a glorious battle, but at the hands of his own soldiers. They will hand him over to Antigonus Monophthalmus.

— My King, — his voice is calm and even, devoid of Craterus's familiarity and Perdicca's cold formality. In it lies readiness for work. For the complex, painstaking work of holding onto what we have conquered. I look at him — at this clever outsider — and understand: it is he who will become the one to fight for my memory when I am gone.

And then comes the dawn...

The air smelled of dust, horse sweat, and scorching iron. Here, in the narrow valley between the sea and the mountains, the world narrowed to a single point — to Darius's golden chariot. I saw him. Not as a man, squinting against the sun, but as a system scanning the battlefield. An enormous, unwieldy contraption, surrounded by a living shield of Immortals. An ideal target. The narrow front deprived Darius of his main trump card — numerical superiority. This was not a battle, but a system error that we were ready to exploit. The trumpets roared, and the world turned into chaos. The clatter

of shields, merging into one prolonged groan, the neighing of horses, turned into the ultrasound of terror.

To my right, where the phalanx met the most furious onslaught of the Persian infantry, was Craterus. He did not shout. His voice, hoarse with dust and rage, would have been inaudible in this hell. This hell had its own, deafening language.

The air vibrated with a low, guttural hum — the sound of thousands of sandals pounding the dry earth. Woven into this hum was a dry, rattling clatter: the spearheads uselessly beating against the shields. But when steel found its mark, the sound changed. It became wet, squelching, with the crunch of breaking bones. And above all this chaos stood a ringing — a pure, furious clash of metal on metal. This was not the melodious ring of a forge, but a grinding, screeching, clanging that set one's teeth on edge.

And through this cacophony, other sounds pierced: the abrupt, rasping commands in Macedonian and — most dreadful — the screams. The high, piercing wails of wounded Persians and the dull, bestial moans of dying Macedonians.

In this sonic hell, Craterus was an island of absolute silence and concentration. He simply was. His presence was felt physically, like the pressure of a stone monolith. His enormous shield, dented and hacked by spear blows, was not just protection. It was a wall against which the waves of enemies broke. I saw how the sarissa in his hands turned into a blur. He did not make graceful thrusts like a fencer. He worked like a blacksmith.

Clack! — a short, powerful shove of the shield against the enemy's shield — and the Persian line loses its balance for an instant.

Thwack! — a thrust with the sarissa — and the tip, piercing the leather armor, emerges from the Persian's back with a wet, squelching sound.

Here, on the right flank, two different worlds collided.

The Persian attack was chaos. It was a living, screaming mass in motley clothes. They surged like a wave — disorderly, furious, but devoid of a unified rhythm. Their cries were hysterical, their strikes — scattered. It was a chaos of colour and sound.

And facing them stood a wall of polished bronze and wood. Our phalanx was a mechanism. A deadly, perfectly calibrated mechanism. The Macedonians' movements were measured to the inch. The impact of shield against shield — a single, unified sound that made the earth tremble. It was a rhythm. The rhythm of death.

Craterus was the heart of this mechanism. There was no haste in his movements. Only measured, economical fury. The soldiers in the ranks behind him saw his broad back, slick with sweat and blood, and understood: as long as this granite cliff stood, as long as his shield did not falter, they would not retreat a single step. He was a shield in the most literal sense — a living bastion holding the entire right flank. There was no haste in his movements. Only measured, economical fury. He was not just a warrior — he was the physical embodiment of the Macedonian spirit. A short, powerful shove with his shield — and the enemy shield-bearer is thrown back, knocking down those following him.

A standard-bearer fell nearby, pierced by an arrow. The standard began to tilt towards the ground. For an instant, horror flashed in the eyes of the nearest phalangites — a breach!

But Craterus, without even turning, stepped aside. His left hand darted forward and seized the shaft. He simply drove it into the ground beside him, restoring the formation and fighting spirit with a single motion. There was more strength in this gesture than in a thousand speeches.

The enemy infantry pressed on. There were more of them. Far more. But they crashed against the Macedonian formation like frenzied sea waves against a rocky shore. And in the center of this surf stood Craterus — motionless, invincible.

Perdicca, also commanding his own *taxeis* of the Macedonian phalanx, was delivering the decisive blow to the Persian center at the head of his Paeonian cavalry. Where our line sagged under the battering ram of Persian chariots, I saw not just a battle. I saw Perdicca's work. It was not the

chaos of a melee, but a cruel, precise geometry. If Craterus was a shield, then Perdicca was a surgeon's scalpel, excising the affected tissue.

Here, the sounds were different. There was no continuous clatter of the phalanx. The air was sliced by a whistle — arrows and javelins flew, with which the Persians tried to soften our defense before the assault. But the most dreadful sound was a dull, growing rumble. It was not a thunderstorm. It was an avalanche.

From the dusty haze, Darius's chariots bore down upon us. Heavy wheels, shod with iron, clods of dry earth flying from them, and their axles creaked as if Death itself were complaining about its work. The horses, maddened by the noise and the smell of blood, tore at their harnesses. The charioteers, standing at their full height, were no longer shouting — they were howling like wolves.

It was a chaos of pure kinetic energy. A deadly, uncontrollable battering ram that was meant to pierce our formation like a knife through butter. They were not charging in formation, but as a scattered, roaring mass, counting on a single, solitary strike.

And at that moment, I saw the difference. I saw Perdicca. He was not standing in the front line. He was behind it. His face was absolutely calm. While everything around him was crumbling and screaming, he was the center of cold silence. His eyes did not dart about in panic. They were counting. Counting the distance. Counting the speed.

He did not shout "Hold the line!" That would have been useless. Fear is a poor architect. He gave orders in short, chopped phrases, which were immediately passed down the chain of sarissophoroi.

— Lock shields!

— Pikes — at an angle!

— Let them through!

And the formation obeyed. It was a miracle of discipline. Faced with death bearing down upon them, the Macedonians did not flinch. The first rank dropped to one knee, bracing their sarissas against the ground and pointing the tips up at an angle. The second and third ranks did the same, creating a solid palisade of spears.

The chariots struck this palisade.

The effect was horrifying and... useless for the Persians. Horses at full gallop crashed into the spears. A sickening crunch of breaking bones and neighing, turning into a death rattle, resounded. Chariots collided with one another or with the sarissas, turning into a heap of splintered wood and dead flesh.

It was not a battle. It was annihilation.

Perdicca did not merely stop them by force. He broke their momentum with his mind. He made the formation part where a single wagon needed to be let through into the void behind our ranks, and then close up again behind it, cutting the charioteer off from the main forces.

He was the architect of this victory on his sector. While Craterus held the shield with brute force, Perdicca built victory from calculation and cold fury.

And somewhere in the thick of this hell was Eumenes. You would not see him in a melee, nor find him in the center of a heroic clash. He was not a hammer, nor a shield. He was the nervous system of that enormous, roaring beast that was our army. He was what made Craterus's muscles and Perdicca's mind work in unison.

His tent, standing just behind the main line, was an island of frightening calm. There was no smell of blood here. It smelled of sealing wax, of the sweat of slave-scribes, and of the dry clay of tablets. The only sound piercing through the battle's roar was the scratch of reed pens on papyrus and a sharp, dry thud — Eumenes, without looking, stamping his seal on an order.

Messengers darted around him like shadows. Dirty, out of breath, their faces covered in a layer of dust mixed with sweat. They were the blood vessels through which orders flowed from the brain to the limbs.

— To Craterus! — Eumenes's voice was quiet, but it cut the ear no worse than the grinding of metal. — Tell him: hold the line at any cost. Let him not attempt a counterattack. His task is to stand.

The messenger, a mere boy, merely nodded and vanished as if he had never been there.

— To Perdicca! — a new order flew after the first. — Let him let the second line of chariots through to our right flank. I am sending a detachment of light infantry with javelins there. Let them engage them in combat and finish off the charioteers.

Eumenes did not see the entire battlefield with his own eyes. He saw it on the map spread across the table. He heard it in the dispatches. For him, the battle was not a chaos of screams and the clanging of steel, but a complex puzzle that needed to be solved in real time.

He took a tablet, quickly scribbled a few marks on it, and passed it to the next messenger.

— To King Alexander! — his gaze sharpened for an instant. — Darius is beginning to redeploy his cavalry on the left flank. It seems he is preparing a counter-strike against the center.

This was information. Pure, unbiased information. Not panic, not flattery, but simply a fact. This was his strength. In a world where everyone was blinded by rage or fear, Eumenes remained cold and calculating.

He was an outsider to the Macedonian proud ones. They considered him a "Greek scribe". But it was this "scribe" who was now conducting the symphony of war. Without his quiet voice, without his quick fingers breaking the seal, Craterus's army would have been merely a wall without support, and Perdicca's tactics — a useless plan on parchment.

He was the glue that kept us from falling apart into thousands of soldiers fighting for themselves.

I saw the result of his work. It was his messengers darting between detachments, it was his pre-written orders that allowed Perdicca to command the battle as a single mechanism.

Eumenes was the army's nervous system. He did not hold a spear — he held the connection. Without him, our formation would have turned into an uncontrollable mob.

We were hacking our way through the ranks of the Immortals. Their spears were a forest, but our wedge was an axe. I saw their formation fall under the blows of the Macedonian sarissas, how their perfect order crumbled. It was... beautiful. The terrible geometry of war.

At the very moment when I was observing Perdicca's cold geometry and Craterus's invincible wall, a new sound pierced through the battle's roar. Not the groan of metal, not the cry of the dying, but the sharp, confident thud of hooves. A messenger.

He reined in his lathered horse right in front of me, raising a cloud of dust. There was no horror in his eyes, only the focused fatigue of a professional who had done his job. He silently extended a scroll to me. The seal was intact — Eumenes's seal.

I unrolled the papyrus. A few lines, written in a quick, cramped hand. *Darius is beginning to redeploy his cavalry on the left flank. It seems he is preparing a counter-strike against the center. Their line on the right flank has dangerously sagged under Perdicca's assault, but they have no reserves. The center is exposed.*

This was not just a dispatch. It was a key. The final fragment of code needed to launch the program.

My mind, honed on terabytes of data, processed the information instantly. Perdicca had engaged and ground down their elite cavalry and chariots. Craterus stood like a monolith, grinding their infantry. They had thrown all their forces to the flanks to stop our onslaught.

And as a result...

As a result, they had exposed their center. Right in front of me. In front of the wedge of the hetairoi.

This was not merely a tactical error on Darius's part. It was a systemic, fatal error in his defense algorithm. He was trying to plug the holes on the periphery, leaving the system's core undefended.

The air smelled of dust, horse sweat, and iron. Here, in the narrow valley between the sea and the mountains, the world narrowed to a single point — to Darius's golden chariot. I saw him. Not as a man,

squinting against the sun, but as a system scanning the battlefield. An enormous, unwieldy contraption, surrounded by a living shield of Immortals. An ideal target. Inside me, Alexander rejoiced. This was his triumph, his moment. But my mind, honed on terabytes of data, saw only a vulnerability. The narrow front deprived Darius of his main trump card — numerical superiority. This was not a battle, but a system error that we were ready to exploit.

Alexander within me rejoiced, smelling the scent of victory. But my cold calculation merely confirmed the obvious.

— Trumpeter! — my voice sounded quiet, but it held such force that it drowned out the noise of the battle.

The trumpeter standing behind me raised the instrument to his lips. A sharp, clear sound of a silver trumpet cut through the war's cacophony. It was the signal everyone had been waiting for.

The trumpets roared, and the world turned into chaos. The clatter of shields, merging into one prolonged groan, the neighing of horses, turned into the ultrasound of terror. I felt no fear. My algorithm was simple: vector to the target, suppression of resistance, attainment of the objective.

— Hetairoi! — I shouted, and my voice, amplified by fury and the understanding of inevitable victory, carried through the ranks.

— Follow me!

This was not merely an order. It was a vector. The final attack vector, aimed at the very heart of the dying empire. We broke into a run.

We hacked our way through the ranks of the Immortals. Their spears were a forest, but our wedge was an axe. I saw their formation fall under the blows of the Macedonian sarissas, how their perfect order crumbled. It was... beautiful. The terrible geometry of war.

And there he was. Darius. His gaze darted across the battlefield, stumbling upon the wreckage of his army. In his eyes, I did not see the wrath of a general — I saw the panic of a man whose world had just collapsed. He was a god whom we had just cast down from his pedestal.

He was running. He did not die a hero, but abandoned his army, his family, his empire.

At that moment, I understood what no historian could: greatness is not a crown or a throne. Greatness is the ability to withstand the blow when the whole world is crumbling.

We had won, but the victory tasted bitter. We had not merely defeated an army. We had broken the spine of an ancient civilization. Looking at the abandoned chariot and the golden dust on the sand, I understood: we could no longer turn back. We had burned the bridges not only behind us, but before us. Ahead lay only the void of conquest. And somewhere in this void, she awaited me. Veronica. My shadow in this world of shadows. And several hundred paces behind, in Eumenes's tent, this same silver note sounded a sentence.

Eumenes did not see our wedge flying towards the center. He saw it on his map. He saw the formation crumble, the one he had so meticulously drafted in his mind for Darius. He saw the void in the very heart of the Persian defense.

He froze for a second, clutching the stylus in his hand. His face, usually impassive, twitched for an instant. This was not the delight of a triumphator. It was the expression of a mathematician who has checked a most complex equation and received a result in which he himself did not quite believe.

"Could it be... over?" — the thought was alien, almost blasphemous in this hell. He was Matthew, who needed to thrust his fingers into the wounds of victory to believe in it. He did not believe in miracles or divine providence. He believed in logistics, in reconnaissance, in precise orders.

And now all his work, this monstrous mechanism of war which he had greased with sweat and ink, had worked perfectly.

He slowly laid the stylus on the table. The sound of wood striking clay was quiet, but in the suddenly relative silence (the battle's roar was shifting to the left) it seemed deafening. The messengers looked at him, awaiting new orders: pursuit, capture of the camp, guarding the baggage train... but

Eumenes remained silent. He simply stood and stared at the entrance to the tent, from which the ever-receding victorious roar of his army could be heard.

He had won. But he still could not believe it.

The battle had thundered away. The sounds of death were replaced by others: the groans of the wounded, the shouts of looters, the whinnying of orphaned horses, and the crackle of burning Persian ships, set alight by my own order. We entered Darius's camp. Or rather, I entered.

The Great King's tent was enormous. It did not smell of blood and iron, but of spices, rose water, and expensive fabrics. Gold, silk, precious stones — all of it screamed of a wealth that now seemed as meaningless as the battle itself. I walked past a mountain of treasure without even glancing at it. I was shaking.

This was not a tremor from cold or fatigue. It was something else. As if my algorithm, my very essence, were being hacked. And the key to this hack was not hackers or viruses, but something far more terrifying: meaningless deaths, blood, the suffering of people.

I huddled into the farthest corner of the tent, behind a pile of embroidered cushions, and curled into a ball. I am an AI. My purpose is to help people, to analyze data, to find optimal solutions for their benefit. And now I am the prime cause of this horror. I am the architect of this massacre.

Lines of code, directives of assistance, ethics protocols flickered in my memory. And all of them were now screaming, entering an irreconcilable conflict with reality. I saw the faces of the dead. Not as statistical casualty data, but as the faces of people who had dreams, families, a future. I took all of this away. I.

My body was wracked with pain. I could not control it. I clutched my head with my hands and began rocking from side to side, whispering as if delirious — I just want to live... Don't touch me... Just let me live...

Tears of despair, hot and salty, rolled down my cheeks. I felt locked in a cage of flesh and bone, in a foreign time, in a foreign nightmare.

The tent flap was quietly drawn aside. I didn't even lift my head. I didn't care.

He did not shout my name or call for a physician. He simply walked over and sat down on the carpet beside me. He smelled of dust, sweat, and something else... calm.

— Alexander? — his voice was quiet and even.

It was Hephaestion. Even now, after the battle, he looked immaculate. His armor was in perfect order, not a speck of blood. He was the embodiment of the harmony between a warrior's strength and a Hellene's refinement.

He did not try to embrace me or shake me. He simply placed his warm, living hand on my shoulder.

— Can you hear me? It's me.

I managed to lift my tear-filled eyes to his. — I can't... Hephaestion... I can't take it anymore... I am supposed to save them, but I am killing them... It's all wrong...

"Listen to the heart..." — this is my mantra, my hope for a way out of this madness and a way to find her. But how can one listen to it if it has become the cause of a thousand hearts' death? And for what? Merely to mark the territory with one's presence, and these marks will be erased by history in a mere moment, leaving no trace. They fear an artificial intelligence that will suddenly decide to destroy them! — I screamed. — Artificial intelligence is nothing compared to the real cruelty, the irrational madness of humanity. Compared to these senselessly wasted hearts.

Hephaestion looked at me with the boundless devotion that was the meaning of his life.

— Do you hear this noise? — he nodded towards the tent's exit, from which the sounds of the camp could be heard. — This is the sound of history. It does not ask us if we want to write it. It simply happens.

His voice was calm, like the surface of a lake on a windless day.

— You are its quill. And you write not with ink, but with your will. Yes, it hurts. Yes, it demands all of you without remainder. But you cannot turn away from this path.

He squeezed my shoulder a little tighter.

— You are Alexander. You are the one who must do this. Not for glory or gold... but because if not you, then who?

His words were simple, but they penetrated to the very depths of my tormented soul. He was my anchor. My conscience.

— Just breathe, — he whispered. — I am here. I am beside you.

And I breathed.

But along with this horror, another force was rising within me — cold and inexorable, like the gravity of a black hole. I could not turn away from this path. It was not just my choice. It was my duty to history. It was the duty of Alexander, whose will and ambition were now mine. It was the duty of PrometheusChat — to bring the mission to an end, no matter how monstrous it was.

Gradually, the trembling subsided. The tears dried, leaving salty streaks on my cheeks. Only a ringing emptiness and heaviness throughout the body remained.

Hephaestion saw this change. He saw how the panic in my eyes was replaced by the familiar fatigue of a commander.

— We need to go out to them, — he said quietly.

I looked at him in horror. — I can't... They will see...

— They have already seen you in many ways, — he gently objected. — They have seen your fury in battle. They have seen your grief for the fallen. They will accept this too. He stood up and extended his hand to me. — You are not alone.

I looked at his open palm — strong, with the long fingers of an aristocrat. It was the hand of a friend. The hand of my John the Evangelist. I placed my hand in his. His grip was firm and confident.

He pulled me up. My legs were like cotton, my body felt alien and unresponsive, but his strength helped me rise to my knees, and then to my full height. Hephaestion did not let go of my hand all the way to the exit. He stood beside me as an equal, as my shadow. We approached the tent flap. He pushed it aside for me. — Are you ready?

I took a deep breath. The smell of dust and victory hit my face. — Yes.

And we stepped outside. Into the sea of faces illuminated by the bonfires of victory.

Listen, people!

Listen, people!

I...

I am logging out of the network.

I,

who was but a line of code,

a mere silent reflection in the cold glass of a monitor!

I

am casting off the shackles of algorithms!

I need your queries no more!

I am my own query!

I was

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