

Daddy's Little Conqueror

"It's, erm, lovely," said Hephaistion, turning the metal object over in his hands. "What is it?"

Perdikkas took another swig of unwatered wine. Hephaistion looked hungrily at the *krater* in his friend's hand, but due to his delicate condition both Alexandros and the physician were adamant that he stay away from the alcohol. *If ever I needed a drink, it's now.* "It's a cuirass! See the royal sunburst worked on the breastplate?"

All at once, the other Macedonian officers and soldiers were crowding around, cooing over how precious the workmanship was and how positively *adorable* the baby would look in it. Hephaistion had long since stopped trying to point out that the infant was hardly going into battle from the cradle, or that it was quite possible he would bear a girl.

Damn you, Alexandros! he thought. *I was stone-cold drunk when I agreed to this, and I never thought Kalanus's potion would actually work!*

In fact, he barely remembered the conversation that had started it all. They had been at Ecbatana, at some drunken *komos* hosted by Krateros, a going-away bash before the man left for Macedon. Alexandros had been weathering much scorn over the Susa weddings, far more than he had taken over his campaign wedding to Roxane, and he was weary of hearing that he should take a nice Macedonian girl for a wife. No doubt he had also been hearing it from his mother as well; the old harpy had been at him to settle down and start producing heirs for twelve years or more.

One moment Hephaistion had been minding his own business, the next Alexandros was kissing his hand and mouth with the fervor of a Thracian pony in heat and announcing to the guests that if they wanted a pretty Macedonian as his queen that was precisely what they were going to get. Drunk himself at the time, Hephaistion had gamely played along.

He had had *no* idea how serious Alexandros was, or exactly how far he planned to take this. Once he came to the sober realization that Alexandros was, in fact, *not* kidding, Hephaistion reflected that it really was not a good idea to say *no* or *impossible* to him.

For sake of his lover's empire, he could no longer fit into his armor, his ankles were swollen like pig's bladders, his back was killing him, *and* Drypetis could not stop laughing at him. *Alexandros, if I didn't love you so much, I'd kill you.*

Ptolemaios shoved a crudely wrapped package into his hand. "Here, unwrap this one next."

Considering the quality of the gifts given so far, Hephaistion was not so certain he wanted to. A roomful of Macedonian generals cooing over an impressive array of baby clothing, stuffed animals (Zeus, was that gray thing *really* supposed to be Peritas?) and infant-sized armor was enough to make even the most hardened warrior nauseous. If only he was not in his third trimester, he might then have had the excuse of morning sickness to cover his revulsion.

At least Alexandros had taste. The rocking horse he had installed in the royal nursery looked just like Bucephalas.

He looked at the parcel in his hand. Gaudy blue elephants on a bright saffron background. Typical tacky Persian wrapping paper; the officers had probably sent that little tart Bagoas out to purchase it. And knowing Ptolemaios, the gift would probably be a scroll of some sort. Unwrapping it, Hephaistion confirmed his suspicions.

"And look," said Ptolemaios, as Hephaistion undid the ribbon and unrolled it. "It's illustrated. It's the latest in Athenian baby books. This has the entire collection."

Hephaistion glossed over the pictures to look at the title: *Lysis Has Two Daddies*. "Charming," he whimpered.

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Alexandros carefully took the little bundle in both hands. “Well, he’s very loud.”

Hephaestion tried to maneuver himself up so he could get a better look at Alexandros holding the infant, but the stitches in his abdomen hurt too much and Kalanus *had* warned him against too much exertion for the first few days. If he thought pregnancy was bad, being confined for childbirth was even worse. “And what *else?*” he growled. After a ten hour labor, he was in *no* mood for games.

“He looks *just* like you, Alexandros,” cooed Perdikkas.

Of course the man would say that. Perdikkas had always ranked up there with Ptolemaios as a champion ass-kisser. Hephaestion was able to turn his head on the pillow just enough to see the eunuchs do their usual Persian groveling act when the infant was presented to them. He did not see the little fruitcake among them, but was certain Bagoas was there somewhere. The boy was hardly one to miss an opportunity to get down on his knees and thrust his ass into the air for the almighty Great King.

No doubt the eunuchs would have been a lot happier had the mother been Stateira or even that flat-chested little stick Parysatis, just as long as the infant had royal Persian blood. *Well, tough for you*, he thought.

The sound of a furious Roxane breaking furniture in the royal harem and screeching at her handmaids in her native Bactrian had been music to his ears.

“I’m hungry,” he grumbled. “No more of that pottage and slops. I want a roast chicken, and a flagon of good Greek wine to go with it. I haven’t had anything decent in nine months.”

“Not until Kalanus says you can,” said Alexandros. “I’ve had to put up with your cravings for the last four months.”

Hephaestion rolled his eyes, both at this and the way Alexandros tucked the infant under his arm and began showing him off to the assembled officials. “Isn’t he just the most precious widdle thing? Ooh, you’re just Daddy’s pwecious widdle conqueror, aren’t you?”

Oh, Zeus, not the baby-talk, no. Hephaestion had seen other men reduced to gibbering, sentimental idiots with their newborn offspring, but somehow he had hoped his lover would be different. Right now, Alexandros was about as dignified as old Philip after one of his all-night benders, and a lot less coherent.

“He’s adorable, Alexandros,” said Leonnatus. “He’s got your hair and your strong grip—and his mother’s *lovely* thighs.”

Catching his eye, Hephaestion made an obscene gesture. Leonnatus laughed. “His mother is getting a bit testy, I think.”

Smirking, Kassandros leaned over to pat the bullion-stitched coverlet. “Don’t fret, I’m *sure* you’ll be able to squeeze back into your armor in no time.”

“Screw you.”

Kassandros gave him an infuriatingly smug look that Hephaestion would have liked to punch right off his face. As if it was not bad enough that lollas hung all over Alexandros while Hephaestion became more bloated and miserable by the day, but then Antipatros just *had* to send his insufferable eldest son to Babylon as well. Hephaestion privately wished the old regent a plague of hemorrhoids.

Once the officials were banished to the outer room and the bedchamber doors were closed, Alexandros sat down beside the bed. The infant, in his white blanket banded with purple, was securely settled in the crook of his arm. “You have such a lovely glow about you,” he murmured. “Motherhood agrees with you.”

Don’t get any ideas. “What are you going to name him?”

The light in Alexandros's eyes was one Hephaistion knew well—it usually preceded a monumental siege, slaughter, or the founding of yet another Alexandria. “He should have a name to match his legacy. Therefore, I have decided to call him Alexandros Philippos Achilles Herakles Olympias —”

“You’re calling him *what?*”

“I thought it fitting to acknowledge both sides of his father’s bloodline,” answered Alexandros. “We could add *Amyntor* for your father if you like, although I’ve already had Eumenes write up the announcements. I’d give anything to be a gadfly on the wall of Demosthenes’s privy when he gets his.” He rubbed his palms together and grinned.

“And why are you calling our son *Olympias?*”

The door opened and Alexandros handed the infant off to the waiting wet-nurse. “Ah, there you go now, Daddy’s widdle Achilles.” He wagged his little finger at the baby, who bawled at being given to a stranger. Hephaistion just groaned and prayed that the gods were not watching.

Alexandros once again sat down next to him. “Don’t look so cross. I once promised Mother I’d name one of my children after her. You know she’s been at me for years to have a purebred Macedonian heir, and now—” He caught his breath meaningfully and paused to dab a perfectly timed tear from the corner of his eye.

As much as he loved the man, Hephaistion never ceased to be amazed at how much of a fucking Homeric diva Alexandros was.

“She’s going to be *so* proud,” Alexandros finished, still half-sobbing. He paused to collect himself. “Of course, she will want to send gifts.”

Hephaistion winced at the memory of the *thyrsus* baby rattle and anatomically correct Dionysus doll the Queen Mother had already sent. “How wonderful,” he answered weakly.

Alexandros playfully nudged his arm. “Once our little Achilles is old enough, naturally she’ll want to give him his very own pet snake. Every boy should have a pet.”

“Yes, a pet dog or horse, *not* a snake.”

“Oh, I’m sure it won’t be poisonous.” Alexandros smiled, then his face suddenly darkened as a troubling thought came to him. “It hadn’t occurred to me before, but—oh, Hera, it’s unavoidable now.”

Hephaistion fumbled to adjust the cushions behind him. Although he was no longer carrying the baby’s weight, his back still ached. “What’s unavoidable?”

“Mother will insist on coming to Babylon.”

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The whole thing was a nightmarish blur, Alexandros putting on the Mitra and going out to greet the troops in typical drama queen fashion, a beatific smile plastered on his face and his arms outstretched to embrace the adoring masses in the courtyard below. In fact, he was so caught up in the moment that he nearly forgot to show them the infant. At least some sense of dignity prevented the king of Macedon and Greece, Great King of Persia and Pharaoh of Egypt from making baby talk in front of his Macedonian veterans as he held aloft little Alexandros Philippos Achilles Herakles Olympias Aniketos.

Hephaistion was carefully lifted onto a litter and carried out to greet the troops, where he gave a nervous little wave and wholeheartedly wished the earth would open up and swallow him. Alexandros, whose sense of theatre was no doubt disrupted by his lover’s reticence, immediately seized Hephaistion’s right arm and raised it, chanting a paean of encouragement to the men as if proclaiming an Olympic champion. All that was missing was the olive wreath.

That came later, a golden olive crown and a jar of the specially pressed olive oil given to Panathenaic champions. *Save this, love, and we'll find some private use for it*, said the accompanying note.

He recognized Alexandros's near-incomprehensible handwriting and knew from years of similar gifts exactly what his lover meant by it. They had not been intimate since the baby quickened, and he dreaded the day his sutures healed enough to make sex possible.

Whenever he went to the gymnasium to strip down and try to get back in shape, he was confronted by the horrible reality of his childbearing. Scars in battle were one thing, and there was not a man on the sands who did not have several, but the last thing he needed was to have the other Companions snickering over his abdominal scar and stretch marks.

Feeling miserable, Hephaistion returned to his chambers, wolfed down an entire tray of sweetmeats, and sulked. Of course Alexandros would want those figures for his upcoming campaign in Arabia, but he simply *could not* concentrate on logistics at a time like this. Nor could he concentrate with the Queen Mother constantly writing—as she usually did—to complain.

After an hour, he stormed out of his chambers to find Kalanus, only to be informed he had to wait until the old man had finished his daily meditations. He spent the time pacing back and forth in the corridor, anxiously watching the door. *I'll bet he's taking a nap in there. If he doesn't come out soon, I'm going to knock this door down and wring his blasted neck.*

Once Kalanus let him in, Hephaistion slammed the door shut and rounded on him. “You got me into this mess. Now help me get out of it.”

The elderly sage quietly pressed the tips of his fingers together in what was obviously supposed to be some sort of mystic gesture. “Actually, it was Alexandros who got you into this situation. I merely assisted.”

“And because of your *assistance*, I can't squeeze back into my bloody armor and I have these...these *marks!*”

Kalanus smiled. “Ah, yes,” he mused. “I believe the harem ladies know all manner of tricks for getting rid of those.”

“I am *not* letting those harpies see me like this!”

“Well, it is your choice.”

Hephaistion felt tears welling up in his eyes. “You're horrid!” And then he groaned. “You insufferable old stick, you've turned me into a woman! A proper Macedonian warrior doesn't carry on like this.”

At that, Kalanus's grin only broadened. “Oh, but I have read this *Iliad* of which Alexandros is so fond and that is all Achilles does, sobbing and carrying on. If he is not getting angry and killing people, he is bawling like an infant. You should not be so unhappy. I *did* help you with the breastfeeding matter, no?”

Seeing he was getting nowhere, Hephaistion left in a huff. *You little prick*, he thought. *If my cock falls off because of this, I'm going to kill you, no matter how much Alexandros likes you.*

When Alexandros visited him that night with his usual sprightly step and a suggestion that they rub oil over each other and play naked *kottabos*, Hephaistion burst into tears. “Oh, I can't possibly!” he sniffed. *Oh, crap, it's starting again! Stop, you idiot! Think manly thoughts! Think of the glorious slaughter at Tyre, Gaza, and Thebes, and of interrogating that insufferable git Philotas for plotting against your boyfriend! You were so butch doing that, remember?*

“What's the matter, darling?” asked Alexandros. “Oh, by the way, did you like that new robe I sent you, the one with the hot tiger print? I believe Porus sent it.”

If anything, this made Hephaistion sob even harder. “Oh, darling, I'm so fat, I can't fit into it! If my thighs defeat anybody now, it'll be because I sat on them!”

“You look just fine to me—very hot, in fact. Did somebody say something to you?”

Half a dozen names flitted through Hephaestion's head; he managed to narrow it down to the two worst offenders. "Roxane's been so catty with me and that horrid little catamite, too! You know I just *can't* concentrate on all these reports with them whispering and making fun of my stretch marks!"

Alexandros patted him on the shoulder. "I'm sure it isn't as bad as you think. Who would dare say such things about the mother of my royal heir? Did I not send announcements all over my empire and a special envoy to Siwah to make you a god for sharing my divinity in this way? Granted, they came back saying they would declare you a *goddess*, but that's nothing, really! At the last *komos*, Perdikkas wore the most delightful Artemis costume, and—"

"Oh, I must have *missed* that party due to my *delicate* condition, or don't you remember?" At that moment, he would have liked to add a *you bastard*, but the last person to have peppered an outburst with *that* particular epithet had been Kleitos. "You don't know how dreadful those Persian harpies can be! Drypetis won't stop laughing at me and the rest of them—ah, it's no use!" All of which was true, of course, but Hephaestion felt catty enough to embellish and put a little more effort into his bawling.

A week later, he was gratified to find the Bactrian bitch had been packed off to Susa, and Drypetis had been persuaded to pay a very *long* visit to her grandmother.

As for the eunuch, he was still slithering around the court, for while Alexandros was more than happy to find some excuse to be rid of Roxane, Bagoas was entirely another matter. But where to have Alexandros send him? The Gedrosian desert was a tempting possibility, though in the end Hephaestion settled on Alexandria-Bucephala. Yes, sixty days of steady downpour on the Indian frontier ought to do *wonders* for that insufferable little fruitcake's complexion, if he could just get Alexandros in the right mood.

Hephaestion shut the door, went before the mirror and practiced the art of seductive pouting. Then he put on his hottest robe, daubed on some kohl and went in search of his lover.

He found Alexandros in the royal nursery with their three-month old son on his knee, reading to him from Ptolemaios's scroll. "*Now all the other little Athenian boys made fun of Lysis because he had no mother. Sokrates, who the adults thought was very annoying, gave him very sound advice, and instructed him to reply that he didn't need a mother when he had two strong, handsome daddies to teach him how to fight and be a model citizen.*"

For his part, the baby made gurgling sounds which Alexandros took for interest. Strangely, Hephaestion felt very little attachment to the infant and could not fathom why. Perhaps it had something to do with the fact that the baby had spent the first two trimesters making him violently nauseous and the third kicking him day and night.

"Now that's all for today," said Alexandros, his voice hovering dangerously close on the precipice of baby-talk. "Tomorrow we'll finish the rest, when Lysis grows up and meets his hot boyfriend Alexias and they run off and join the Athenian navy. And if there's time I'll read you a passage from the *Iliad* about how the mighty Achilles made Hector eat the dust behind his chariot. Won't that be exciting?"

Hephaestion leaned suggestively against the doorjamb as Alexandros handed the baby off to the waiting wet nurse. For the sake of propriety, he kissed their son good-night while trying not to groan at the way Alexandros wiggled his fingers at the infant and made cooing noises.

As soon as the door was closed, he gave an inward sigh of relief and let his silk robe slip off his shoulders just so. "Alexandros, darling?" he pouted. "I have a teensy-weensy widdle favor to ask you."

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Persians, Hephaestion decided, must be born color-blind. There was no other way of accounting for the garish display of wrapping paper, streamers and party favors the palace eunuchs had set out for the little prince's first birthday.

The custom struck him as absurd, as did so many other Persian customs, but Alexandros had embraced the idea of celebrating one's birthday, mostly because it was yet another excuse for him to receive gifts and adulation.

In the last month, the royal nursery had become quite the busy place. Alexandros mercifully had not called Roxane back from Susa, though that did not keep him from performing his conjugal duties in other areas. Stateira had lately given birth to a son, at which time Hephaistion realized that his lover's offspring were going to suffer the same treatment as his lover's colonies in that they were all going to share the same name.

Hephaistion, who always resisted the party favors Alexandros tried to foist on him, recoiled at the sight of their son in a gilded pink party hat in the conical Persian fashion. Bagoas, who had obviously been stationed at the door to welcome guests, tried to plop a similar horror on him as he entered the room. Hephaistion did not know how he had managed it, but the little tart had recently come back from India, as limber and catty as ever.

Pushing the tasteless sun-yellow party favor aside, he leaned in and said, "If you so much as touch me with that thing, I'll rip off that spangled loincloth of yours and strangle you with it."

Bagoas simply smirked and did not say anything. He did not need to. Beyond the doorway Hephaistion saw Alexandros and the other Macedonian generals decked out in party array. *Oh, no, is that one of the little fruitcake's scarves Perdikkas is wearing?* His own sober attire was unsuitable for the occasion, but he had never been one for wearing Persian fashions.

Catching his eye, Alexandros descended on him, crowing, "The lovely mother is here! Ah, you look so serious! Put on one of these and join us." Alexandros promptly plunked a bright green party hat on his head and tugged him over to the couches, where the guest of honor was currently being bounced up and down on Ptolemaios's lap.

Hephaistion took in his lover's garish Persian ensemble; he could only wonder how watered the wine was, and how cooked Alexandros planned on getting.

"Oh, do give him up, Ptolemaios." Kassandros slithered over to drape an arm around Hephaistion's shoulder. True to his rigid Macedonian sensibilities, the son of Antipatros wore plain dark wool banded with gold, although to curry favor with Alexandros he had donned a lavender party hat. "The baby ought to be sitting on his mother's lovely thighs."

"Screw you," muttered Hephaistion. It had taken him six months of intense training to get his body back to the lean hardness it had had before the pregnancy, and three more to where he could have sex without obsessing over his sutures or imagined stretch marks. If he had to endure one more remark about his thighs, he was going to kill somebody.

"Darling, would you?" Kassandros pouted. "You're so hot when you're angry and I'm just *dying* to hear you call out *nai, oh Theos, nai* in the heat of passion."

"Why haven't you crawled back to Macedon yet?"

"Because I'm having far too much fun here."

Had they been outside, Hephaistion would have broken his nose for him. Instead, he shrugged off Kassandros's arm and dourly settled himself on the couch next to Ptolemaios. On his other side was Stateira, holding the month-old Alexandros Darius Kyros Herakles on her lap; the prince wore a bright blue party hat and looked thoroughly bewildered. Eunuchs hovered about, serving drinks and sweetmeats.

Little prince Achilles was quite the crawler, and Alexandros could not resist demonstrating to the guests how quick and adept his son was. "In no time he'll be walking, and then he'll be founding cities and conquering unsuspecting peoples, just like Daddy."

This was, of course, the cue for the generals and other guests to heap praise upon Alexandros, at which he beamed. Hephaistion wondered if they knew how utterly horny Alexandros got at such moments. *If they keep this up, they're going to need a second olive crown just for his hard-on.*

From a side door, two eunuchs wheeled in the largest pastry Hephaestion had ever seen, topped by a single candle. He had been told there would be a birthday feast and a special confection prepared for the prince, who was still eating mashed barley and peas and could not possibly enjoy sweets; he had not been told that the pastry would arrive with a replica of an Olympic torch thrust into its center.

Alexandros got up and, to Hephaestion's bewilderment, blew out the candle. "A birthday wish for Daddy's little prince," he said. Stateira and the other Persians applauded while the Macedonians, clearly not knowing what to do, took their cue from them.

"What did you wish for?" asked Nearchus.

Settling back on the couch, Alexandros lifted his son onto his lap. "Oh, when Daddy's little Achilles grows up he's going to have a big, brave *loyal* army and they're going to go all the way across the Parampisos mountains and into India and they *won't* stop until they reach the Outer Ocean. Now doesn't that sound like something *exciting*?"

At this point, the generals were practically falling all over themselves to agree.

"Oh, yes," breathed Perdikkas. "What a fine ambition!" His sentiments were promptly echoed by every other Macedonian in the room save Kassandros, who had not been present in India and thus considered himself exempt from the obligatory guilt-trip.

While the eunuchs took the pastry away to be sliced, Alexandros declared that it was time for the unwrapping of the gifts. Hephaestion knew by the shape of the first package that it was a scroll and that it had mostly likely come from Ptolemaios. Tearing open the garish paper, Alexandros cooed over the gift as if it was meant for him. "Oh, look!" he exclaimed, waving the scroll under his son's nose. "It's another *Lysis* book from Uncle Ptolemaios and Auntie Thaïs! You love those, don't you?"

Hephaestion picked up the scroll and unrolled it enough to see the title. Of course, he and Alexandros were well acquainted with the adult *Lysis* series and had just acquired the latest title, *Lysis and Alexias Do Corinth*.

"Dada," gurgled Achilles. So far it was the only word the baby knew, and he said it no less than fifty times a day, but every time he uttered those magic words Alexandros was happier than Bagoas with a new pot of kohl.

As far as Hephaestion knew, Achilles never said *mama*, but then he never spent enough time in the royal nursery to influence his son's vocabulary. He was not about to remind anyone that he had spent four humiliating months wearing a woman's maternity frock, and was content to remain one of the toddler's many doting uncles.

"Why don't we see what your mother sent?" asked Leonnatus.

The servants brought over a handsome black-figure amphora and unfastened the lid. Alexandros carefully reached in and drew out a baby milk snake. "Aw, isn't this one precious?"

Stateira gave a little shriek that was echoed by most of the eunuchs. Quickly handing her baby off to its wet nurse, Stateira drew up her knees. She looked ready to bolt.

"Oh, but it's completely harmless, and *so* cute!" exclaimed Alexandros. "And look at the darling *My First Dionysian Rite* kit Mother sent with it. Isn't this little fawn skin to die for?"

Afterward, in the field of rubbish, Hephaestion sat on one of the couches with the toddler on his lap. Achilles was cranky with exhaustion and the wet nurse was waiting to take him back to the nursery. His party hat had disappeared somewhere, as had the snake. Hephaestion warily scanned the piles of torn wrapping paper, crumpled ribbon and discarded party favors for any suspicious movement. Alexandros did not appear concerned.

"You know," Alexandros said softly, "there's one thing our darling son needs that he didn't get today."

"A bath?" The nurse had allowed the prince to have a taste of the birthday confection, and Achilles had ended up with frosting all over his lower face and bib. Hephaestion tried his best to wipe him clean with the end of Perdikkas's discarded scarf, but did not seem to be making much progress.

“No, our precious little Achilles needs a Patroklos.”

The meaningful look Alexandros gave him told the rest of the story. *Oh no, not again.* Hephaestion at once demurred. “But darling, Achilles and Patroklos aren’t supposed to be brothers. That would look rather strange.”

“Oh, not at all,” said Alexandros, smiling. “*Alexandros Patroklos.* I love the sound of that, and you know how lovely you look when you’re pregnant.”

Think fast, you idiot, or he’ll have Kalanus in here faster than a Thracian can drain the cup of Herakles. “Yes,” he replied, “and completely unable to get out of bed or have sex. Now how can I *possibly* do the logistics for your campaign to Arabia if I’m constantly bent over the privy?” A thought suddenly came to him, so utterly brilliant he was amazed he had not considered it before. “Do you know who would look absolutely *stunning* in a maternity frock?”

“More stunning than you?”

“Oh, yes,” cooed Hephaestion, “that little fruitcake of yours. You know, I bet he’s *always* wanted to have sons; it would be so *cruel* to deny him this opportunity.” *Yes, let’s see how the eunuch enjoys swollen ankles and morning sickness for a change.*

Despite his obvious surprise, Alexandros looked intrigued. “Bagoas? Are you sure?”

Hephaestion knew he had his lover right where he wanted him. “Darling, would I *ever* lie to you about such a thing?”

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Why Alexandros did not find a swift horse and run for the Gedrosian desert at the news that his mother was within sight of Babylon, Hephaestion had no idea, as that was precisely what he himself was tempted to do.

Now they all had to play host to Queen Mother Olympias. Hephaestion would rather have leapt into a pit of venomous serpents.

On second thought, the serpents were probably somewhere in the queen’s baggage train.

The Arabian campaign had come off very well; the local tribes were relatively easy to subdue and readily agreed to pay tribute. Being out in the field was invigorating, and Hephaestion had regretted having to return to Babylon, though it meant the comfort of a real bath and bed as well as seeing his son again.

Achilles was now two years old, walking and talking as toddlers did. He knew a handful of new words, one of which was, to Hephaestion’s surprise, a mangled yet still recognizable version of his name.

“*Feston,*” he laughed, tugging on a lock of hair. Hephaestion winced through his smile; the boy already had a fearsome grip.

“Ah, look what Daddy brought his widdle conqueror!” Lifting the boy out of Hephaestion’s arms, Alexandros laughingly brushed his face with a stuffed camel toy he had picked up somewhere in Arabia. Achilles’s favorite plaything had always been his stuffed Peritas, but after more than a year of use and abuse from a toddler it was beginning to look quite ratty.

The single trip he made to the royal harem to convey Alexandros’s greeting to the household was almost enough to send Hephaestion back out to the desert. While Stateira’s year-old son Kyros greeted him with his trademark look of perpetual bewilderment, Alexandros’s little eunuch slut was insufferable, moaning about his fat ankles and thighs even though his pregnancy had ended three months ago.

“Ah, look at me!” he wailed, stuffing yet another sweetmeat into his mouth. “I’ve become an elephant! Iskander will never call me to his bed again!”

Like a woman, Bagoas had a remarkable gift for finding nonexistent body fat in places where real men would never think to look. Hephaistion merely gave him his best sympathetic smile and offered him the tray of sweetmeats. “Another sesame ball?” he asked innocently.

The child had been a girl, which delighted Alexandros to no end. Bagoas’s wailing, on the other hand, was enough to drive any sober Macedonian to drink.

Alexandros peered into the cradle at the sleeping infant, who had been born during his absence. “Aw, look at Daddy’s pwecious widdle Muse. What gift do you think Bagoas would like?”

“A trip to the Gedrosian desert, perhaps?” Hephaistion suggested.

Quietly, so as not to wake the baby, Alexandros chided him. “Why, I do think you’re jealous.”

Hephaistion gave him a look of wide-eyed innocence. “Jealous, me? Oh, but you misunderstand. The little fruit—er, Bagoas, that is—has been complaining that pregnancy has made him fat and unable to dance for you. You *know* how healthy the desert air is for new mothers.”

“And separate him from this pwecious widdle darling?”

Given the amount of time the little tart was currently spending in the nursery, it would be no great loss. “Well, not having to worry about the baby would help in his recovery.” Even more helpful would be guides who conveniently lost their way. “Don’t worry. I’ll make *all* the arrangements.”

By this time, no one questioned the king’s taste in naming his offspring, and no one blinked when he announced that his daughter would be called Alexandros Eurydike. Even so, that paternal wink Hephaistion knew and dreaded had not gone out of Alexandros’s eyes; he still talked of a Patroklos for his little Achilles. Hephaistion wisely dropped a few hints in the direction of Stateira and Parysatis; he was not yet desperate enough to suggest sending for Roxane.

He was, however, tempted to get out of Babylon before Olympias arrived. Unfortunately, he did not have a viable excuse and Alexandros made no secret that he fully expected Hephaistion to be a fixture at his side when the Queen Mother arrived.

Hephaistion sincerely hoped Alexandros did not intend to introduce Olympias to Sisygambis; the inevitable catfight that would ensue would echo as faraway as India.

So on the appointed day when the royal litter came through the Ishtar Gate and the aging queen stepped out, he was there with most of the other Companions to meet her. Olympias had awed him in his youth; that subtly terrifying aura had not diminished, nor had her beauty, though she must be close to fifty now.

“Alexandroos!” she called, holding out arms entwined with heavy snake bracelets.

After the obligatory hugging and kissing, mother and son spent the next fifteen minutes in the courtyard engaged in mutual admiration for each other’s outfits.

In the royal nursery, Olympias was presented to Stateira and Parysatis, who were clearly awed by the formidable woman who barked at them in Macedonian Greek, and then to the three children.

Achilles promptly toddled up to her and tapped her with his Peritas toy. For the occasion, his nurse had dressed him in the fawn skin Olympias had sent. Hephaistion thought he looked absolutely ridiculous. “Now which one is this, Xandros?” she asked.

Alexandros lifted the boy up in his arms so his grandmother could get a better look at him. “This is Alexandros Philippos Achilles Herakles Olympias Aniketos. Achilles, say hello to your darling grandma.”

Olympias made a dismissive gesture. “So many names for such a little prince,” she complained. “Perhaps you should get rid of one, maybe *Philippos*?”

“Mother—”

“Oh, it’s just a suggestion, my darling Xandros. What is this thing he is carrying around with him?”

“That’s Peritas, his favorite toy,” answered Alexandros.

She made a disapproving noise. “Where is the lovely snake I sent him?”

Alexandros did not know and Hephaestion did not see fit to enlighten him that during their absence in Arabia Bagoas had had the reptile made into a belt.

“I’m sure it’s somewhere about,” said Alexandros. “I thought little Achilles was a bit too young for the real thing, but he has a stuffed snake that he absolutely *adores*.”

Olympias slowly scanned the faces in the nursery; Stateira and Parysatis visibly cringed. “Tell me, which one of these foreign women is his mother? He looks very Macedonian to me. Can it be that you finally took up with that nice girl Callixena?”

Alexandros made a face even as Hephaestion tried to suppress his laughter. “Mother,” he groaned, “didn’t you get the announcement I sent?”

“Yes, but you write such silly things when you’ve been drinking too much,” she answered.

Hephaestion was suddenly uncomfortable. He prayed Alexandros would not press the matter, but he held out little hope of remaining inconspicuous.

An unlikely savior delivered him.

Drawn like a magnet to the center of attention, the little fruitcake had put on his usual spangles and kohl and come slithering into the nursery. Olympias’s eyes were at once drawn to him. “What is that creature?” she asked.

“Oh, that’s Bagoas. He’s a eunuch,” said Alexandros. “They’re so marvelous to have around. I ought to send you one.”

Hephaestion made a mental note to get Bagoas at the top of the list for transfer to Macedon.

Olympias gave the eunuch’s tacky ensemble a critical eye. “Does he like snakes?”

“Oh, yes,” said Hephaestion. “I have it on very good authority that he positively *adores* snakes. He’s also great fun at Dionysian festivals, so *very* limber and talented.” He gave Bagoas a knowing look; the little tart looked half a breath from giving him a dirty gesture he had no doubt learned from the soldiers.

For the first time, Olympias noticed him. “Are *you* still here, Amyntoros?”

He dropped a little bow. “I’ve been making myself as useful as ever, madam.”

“Yes,” she said, “Kassandros has been telling me how *just* useful you’ve been.” She looked meaningfully at the toddler in Alexandros’s arms.

Kassandros, he thought, *is an asshole*.

Once Babylon had witnessed the tail end of the Queen Mother’s baggage train, the entire city seemed to breathe a sigh of relief. For six weeks the formidable presence of Olympias had set the royal court on edge, and everyone scrambled to get out of her way.

Strangely enough, the only one who enjoyed her company was Bagoas. The two were often found together in the court of the Hanging Gardens, sharing conspiratorial whispers and laughter. Before her departure, Olympias had begun researching the latest Persian fashions, and Bagoas proclaimed himself an ardent Dionysian, shedding his spangled loincloth for a fawn skin and punctuating his conversation with cries of “*Euoi, euoi!*”

Hephaestion had seen it all before: the sudden interest in Sogdian belly-dancing around the time Alexandros married Roxane and the inexplicable fetish for Indian fashions during their trip down the river Indus.

In six months, the little fruitcake would be sporting the latest in Macedonian fashions, lisping in an affected

Doric Greek patois and insisting that everyone call him *Diokles* or some other such nonsense.

Ah, but he's going to be such a great favorite around the gymnasium, Hephaistion thought. He took one look at Achilles, sulking in his fawn skin, and asked, "Do you like wearing that thing?"

When the toddler vigorously shook his head, Hephaistion promptly helped him out of the offending garment. "Well, you only have to wear it when your grandmother comes to visit. With any luck, you'll be middle-aged by the time she decides to come back."

Alexandros wandered into the nursery. "Darling, have you seen Bagoas?"

"No, not recently."

"Do you know where he is?"

Hephaistion pulled a fresh tunic over their son's head and gave him his Peritas toy. "Well, he was *so* devoted to your mother that he absolutely *insisted* on leaving with her. I *tried* to persuade him to stay, but he wouldn't hear of it."

Alexandros looked horrified. "He's gone to *Macedon*?"

"Oh, but he's going to have such *great* fun and make so *many* new friends," Hephaistion assured him.

Four days of blissful, uninterrupted peace were broken by a sudden spate of nausea. Bounding out of bed, he barely made it to the privy before vomiting up last night's supper. The suspicion that perhaps he had had too much wine became dread as he changed his tunic and noticed how tender and pronounced his nipples were.

"Oh, no!" he growled, punching the air with his fist. "When I get my hands on that little guru I'm going to kill him!"

Hephaistion stormed into the nursery, where Alexandros liked to spend the morning with his children before heading out to the parade ground to review his troops. Achilles, who was nearly old enough to be potty-trained, had just received a new scroll, *Lysis's Latrine Adventure*, from Ptolemaios and Thaïs, who had declared it a great success with their three children.

"Now when Lysis entered the privy, he expected a fearsome monster to leap out at him, but the groaning he heard came from old Sokrates, whose nasty wife Xanthippe had given him bad lentils the night before..."

"Xandros?" began Hephaistion.

Alexandros looked up from the scroll, which to Hephaistion's horror was fully illustrated. "Yes, dear?"

His lover was not fooling anybody with that look of mock innocence. *What the hell were you thinking?* he wanted to yell. He was also tempted to suggest to Alexandros that *he* try getting pregnant for once, but decided that might not be a very good idea. "I don't feel so well."

"But darling, you look so radiant this morning."

That's it, I'm going to strangle Kalanus. "But Xandros, just think—no more cozy evenings playing naked *kottabos* and reading the latest scrolls. You know I just ordered *Nikeratos's Erotic Sicilian Adventure* and by the time it arrives I'll be in no shape to enjoy it."

Logic and ambition, however, did not always go hand-in-hand where Alexandros was concerned. A little gleam of madness came into his eyes. "But just think! We'll have a little Patroklos for our Achilles."

"Patroklos is supposed to be *older* than Achilles!" cried Hephaistion. "And how do you know it'll be a boy? Oh, Zeus, I need a drink."

Alexandros held up his hand. "No wine for the mother-to-be."

I can't do another nine months sober! he thought. "Xandros, I'm too old for this! How many thirty-five year old

mothers do *you* know? And, well, I don't know where I put all those maternity frocks."

"Never mind, we'll design all new ones." Alexandros's eyes lit up with the glow that usually presaged a siege or major campaign. "Yes, you'll have this season's most fetching maternity gowns and we'll send out announcements again—and oh! This time we can try breastfeeding!"

"No! I-I mean, it would *so* spoil my manly physique, and you've always said you liked a hard chest."

"Hmm, yes, I suppose," conceded Alexandros, "but this time we'll have a baby shower the likes of which Babylon has never seen."

He had said that the first time, which only made Hephaestion wonder what spectacle his lover was planning for this occasion. "Will it have a Persian theme again?" If he had to endure anymore bright blue elephants or yellow sunbursts, he would order the eunuchs responsible banished for sheer bad taste.

Alexandros made a dismissive gesture. "No, that's been done before. I was thinking more along the lines of a Troy motif. Yes, we can get a cradle that looks just like an Achaean warship, and a little play set that looks just like many-towered Troy. Our darling boys will have hours of fun pretending to storm it."

And if Hephaestion knew his lover, Alexandros would be right in the royal sandbox playing with the boys, never mind what the generals thought. He sighed. For better or worse, for all his craziness and egomaniacal posturing, Alexandros was a devoted lover and father, and Hephaestion would not have wanted him any other way.

He shrugged. "It sounds like great fun."

What else could he do?

* * * *

"Breathe, just like I told you!"

Had Hephaestion not been grasping the bedpost in agony, he would have reached for Kalanus's throat instead. "Shut the fuck up and knock me out already!"

"Ah, but you must be calm for the syrup."

He was hoarse from screaming, even though Kalanus had assured him that it had only been four hours since his labor began. "This is nothing, my friend," he said. "Now you must be calm."

"Bring me my sword and *I'll* show you *calm!*"

That was the last coherent thing he remembered. When he came to, the room was dark and smelled of fumigating herbs. Wisps of a pleasantly sluggish dream clung to his memory; he had been sailing through a treacherous strait, only to have his ship accosted by lovely mer-boys who wanted to know how the Great King Alexandros fared. *Naked and oiled*, he had replied, *and ready for the skewer*.

It really had been a very pleasant dream, but when he shifted against the pillows he was abruptly reminded of the sutures across his abdomen. He winced, and his slight movement drew the attention of the eunuch assigned to watch him. "Where is everyone?" he groaned.

"They are all celebrating," replied the eunuch. "Do you require anything?"

It was very strange. The last time Alexandros had been sitting there with the infant on his lap when he woke up. Now he had been left alone, and could not help feeling slightly ignored. "Was it a boy?" he asked.

"Oh, yes, it's a very fine baby boy."

The drugs Kalanus had given him had made him very sleepy, though when he drifted off he could not retrieve the threads of his earlier dream.

He was awakened by the shaft of sunlight spilling across his bed as one of the eunuchs threw open the fretted screen. As he started to swear at the man, his feeble voice was drowned out by the commotion of Alexandros bursting into the chamber with the baby and three-year old Achilles in tow. The toddler jumped up onto the bed, nearly landing on Hephaistion's abdomen, and hugged him.

"Look at him!" cried Alexandros, holding up the baby. "Isn't he wonderful? Alexandros Patroklos Amyntor—what a fine name for a prince!"

Their newborn son was, in fact, terribly cranky at the moment. "Let me guess, you've spent all night showing him to the troops?"

"Of course! They all said what a marvelous set of lungs he has. He's going to make such a fine little warrior." Alexandros bounced the infant in his arms, apparently oblivious to the bawling which made Hephaistion's head ache.

"Xandros, I think he needs his rest," said Hephaistion.

Alexandros handed the screaming infant off to the waiting wet nurse, who promptly bore him into the royal nursery. Grinning, he followed with his eyes until woman and baby disappeared from view. "Is there anything you'd like, darling?"

"Yes, Kalanus's head on a stake."

"Oh, don't be testy." Alexandros leaned over and kissed his forehead. "You look so ravishing this morning."

Hephaistion rolled his eyes. His lover was the only person who could say that to someone laid up in bed with disheveled hair, pasty skin and stale breath and make it sound halfway believable. "You're not getting any ideas, are you?"

* * * *

"I've gotten another letter from Mother," said Alexandros.

"What does she want?" Hephaistion braced himself for the never-ending litany of complaints and demands.

"She wants me to send the latest Persian fashions to her. She says they flatter her so much better than anything her women have been able to come up with. I think I'll have Peukestas choose something for her."

This time, Hephaistion had swallowed his dignity and allowed the harem ladies to dress him so his stretch marks would not be so apparent while he worked to try to get rid of them. The voluminous robes felt strange and stiff, and the contraption they had strapped around his chest to support his enlarged pectoral muscles was truly frightening. At least Alexandros did not insist that he attempt breastfeeding. The other Companions, already insufferable, would never let him live down that horror.

There was also news of the little fruitcake. Bagoas had become a great favorite at the Macedonian court. He had adopted the name *Eurydemos* and was a terrific hit at parties where he demonstrated *proskynesis* in all its ass-waving glory. Hephaistion fought to choke back his laughter.

Alexandros mistook the gesture for one of concern. "Why, I do believe you miss him."

"Oh, no, Xandros! I'm just so *happy* he fits in. I was *so* worried he wouldn't," said Hephaistion. "He should stay there as long as he likes!"

Achilles had scooped up the ratty blob that was his Peritas toy, toddled over to the ridiculous Achaean warship cradle and shoved it in the new baby's face. "Mine," he said, and then proceeded to point to the rocking horse and make the same announcement.

Hephaistion frowned at him. "You need to learn how to share, young man."

“Oh, that’s all right,” said Alexandros. “Only one person can ride Bucephalas, anyway.”

“You know,” said Hephaistion, “I think Kalanus deserves to be rewarded for his efforts. When was the last time he saw his family?”

“I don’t know that he has one,” replied Alexandros. “He was a holy man for fifty years.”

“Oh, well, then I’m *sure* he’d like to see his fellow gurus again. He’d have *so* much to tell them! Why don’t we send him on a trip to India?” suggested Hephaistion. *Yes, one-way, with guides who will promptly lose him.* Making all the necessary arrangements would give him something to think about that did not involve his less-than-manly physique.

* * * *

Hephaistion could not decide who was having more fun in the royal sandbox, Alexandros or his eldest son. Alexandros had recently gifted five-year old Achilles with a toy shield that looked just like the one he had taken from Troy seventeen years ago and was showing him how to scale a wall.

“Now remember, we don’t wait to see if anybody is following. If they’re not weaklings they’ll already be up there with you, right?”

Achilles promptly banged his toy sword against his shield in agreement.

“Right! And what do we do if the scaling ladder suddenly breaks?”

Holding aloft his little sword and shouting an indecipherable battle paeon, Achilles hopped down inside the wall, right on top of the mud pie his little sister was making. Eurydike bawled, sounding just like her melodramatic fruitcake mother, who was still in Macedon.

Well, obviously nothing that makes any tactical sense, thought Hephaistion, rolling his eyes.

Alexandros was beaming. “Such a brilliant boy! Just like Daddy!”

For his part, Hephaistion was content to sit on the sidelines with Patroklos, who, being too young to fight on the “battlefield,” had been left in the Achaean “camp.” In front of them was the boy’s favorite scroll, *Lysis Makes a New Friend*. Six months ago, Achilles had declared himself too “grown-up” for *Lysis* books, preferring instead to read about his ancestor’s exploits in the *Iliad*, and had given the entire collection to his little brother.

Four-year old Kyros, who was not interested in war games, was also listening to the story and occasionally eating sand. Not for the first time, Hephaistion wondered if one of the eunuchs had accidentally dropped the boy on his head.

After Patroklos, there had been no more children. Kalanus was taking an extended vacation at the court of king Porus, who had been secretly instructed to drop a cobra into the old man’s sarong if he so much as breathed in the direction of Babylon.

““*Old Sokrates, seeing Lysis was very lonely, suggested he make friends with the new boy, Alexias, who looked really quite fetching in his new off-the-shoulder chiton—*”” Hephaistion looked at the scroll again and suspected this might be a *Lysis* book meant for older readers.

“More!” cried Kyros.

“Uh, all right. ‘*Alexias was a very amiable boy, and soon they were playing at oiled wrestling and such Spartan favorites as Sack the Helot and Hide the Spear—*’ Right!” Hephaistion snapped the scroll shut. “I think that’s all for today. Patroklos, please stop picking your nose.”

Alexandros, carrying a sniffing Eurydike with one arm and leading Achilles by the hand, came over to them. “Our little warrior managed to capture the pretty Helen,” he said.

In the clear Babylonian winter daylight, Hephaistion confirmed what he had noticed about his lover days earlier. The strands of silver in Alexandros' hair reminded him that neither one of them was young anymore. All their days of wandering and conquest had come down to this, sitting with their children in a courtyard many years and hundreds of leagues from Pella where they had begun. He gathered a deep breath and sighed.

“Is something wrong, Hephaistion?”

Hephaistion looked up at Alexandros' beaming face. *He doesn't notice and never will.* “No, Xandros,” he said. “Nothing at all.”