

Alexandros knew what day it was, and where he'd find Hephaistion. He'd brought Perdikkas with him, as most of the other boys from Mieza to whom Hephaistion had been closest—Erigyios, Ptolemaios, Nearkhos—were in exile. But he hadn't wanted a crowd.

Hephaistion was alone at the graveside. His remaining family had been there earlier, to perform the rites they'd repeat once a month for the first year. When Hephaistion hadn't returned following the day-meal, Alexandros had come after him. Now, he asked Perdikkas to stay with the horses, and picked his way through high summer grass towards the mound, or tumulus. It was hot and humid; he wiped sweat from his forehead. The bugs were bad, but Hephaistion seemed not to notice. Roias grazed nearby as Hephaistion slouched on a bench by the grave stelē in front of the tumulus. A marble horse had been commissioned too, but apparently, it wasn't finished yet.

Hephaistion glanced up at Alexandros's approach, but didn't say anything. Neither did the prince; he just sat down beside his friend and set a hand on his thigh. After a moment, he handed over his water skin and a small bag that had some honey cakes. "Eat."

"Not hungry." He did, at least, drink the water. "They finished the *stelē*."

"It looks good." And it did, a well-cut, finely painted family stone depicting Amyntor on horseback, Berenikē standing beside the horse, reaching up to clasp her husband's hand. Alis and Hephaistion stood off to the left. Alis had been given little Amyntor to hold, although he hadn't been born yet when the stone had been commissioned.

"You keep coming out here with me," Hephaistion said.

Alexandros shrugged. Hephaistion drank from the skin again. A wind stirred hair loose from his braid, and blew Alexandros's curls into his face, but at least it was some relief from the oppressive heat. Birds sang in a nearby oak, but mostly, the plain here was empty until it neared the riverbank. The heavy air smelt of grass and earth, a little stifling, like the silence between them. Alexandros hadn't been fully forgiven for keeping the truth about Amyntor secret. He wasn't sure he ever would be, or if he even should be. Time had thawed the ice, largely due to Hephaistion's decision to let it go, but discomfort occasionally returned.

"I suppose we should head back," Hephaistion said now.

"If you're ready."

"I wanted to talk to him, without anybody around. We'll be leaving for Asia soon. I won't be here for the anniversary rites next spring."

“He’d understand.”

“He wouldn’t like it. He was never in favor of me being in the army, or of these long campaigns away from Makedonia. He never understood the necessity. We stopped talking about it to avoid fighting about it. He’d want me to stay in Europos and take care of the ranch, and my mother and brother.”

A hole opened in Alexandros’s chest, and for a moment, he couldn’t breathe. Fear froze his tongue, then he managed, “And will you? Stay here when we go?”

Frowning slightly, Hephaistion glanced at him. “Of course not.” As if that were obvious. “You’re going; I’ll go. Unless Philippos sets you up again as regent.”

Relief was immediate and he slid an arm around Hephaistion’s back. “He wants me where he can see me, these days. And I want to go.”

“I know you do.”

“Do you want to?” He’d never actually asked before, just assumed.

“I want to be where you are.”

“But do you want to go to Asia?”

Face thoughtful, staring out at the field, not the tumulus, Hephaistion said, “Yes. I’m curious, you know that. My feet aren’t as itchy as yours, but I’d like to see Asia, maybe get to Knidos finally, even if Eudokos is dead. His school’s still there. I never planned to stay in Europos, but I didn’t think my father would be dead already, either. I worry what’ll happen to everything he built. I trust Sopolis—” his brother-in-law “—but...”

“You’re worried about your uncle.”

“And my cousins.”

“I’ll make sure all of them are coming with us.”

Hephaistion just nodded, then stood. “We should go.”

Alexandros stood as well, reaching out for his friend’s hand. “I’ve said it before, and I’ll probably always be saying it, but I’m sorry I didn’t tell you—”

“Stop.” Hephaistion yanked his hand free. “It just...it brings it all up again. You want to fix it, but it can’t be fixed. Not like that.”

“How then? Tell me what to do to fix it.”

Pursing lips, Hephaistion shook his head. “I don’t know. Time. Maybe thinking of me first sometimes, instead of yourself.”

Shame mingled with annoyance in Alexandros's gut. "That was harsh. And unfair."

"Was it?" They weren't quite glaring at each other, but it was a hard stare and all the repressed resentment was bubbling up again. Hurt, Alexandros almost went on defense, but if he did, they'd be right back where they'd been six months ago. More, he was honest enough to recognize that even if his defense would be true—that Amyntor would have insisted Hephaistion go with him into exile—it missed the deeper point.

"All right," he said, at the same time Hephaistion blurted, "I'm sorry, that *was* harsh." Both paused, not sure who should speak first. Alexandros started to let Hephaistion continue with his apology, but wouldn't that be just what Hephaistion had accused him of? "You're right, I can be selfish," he said. "Pitfall of being prince."

"Self-involved might be more correct," Hephaistion replied. He wasn't frowning anymore, at least. "You're surprisingly unselfish. But you are self-involved, and you're right, it's because you're prince. I understood that from the beginning." Sighing, he made a helpless gesture. "Just, sometimes, think about things from my perspective."

"That's why I asked if *you* wanted to go to Asia. I realized I'd never actually asked you."

Hephaistion studied him. "We've both just assumed I would. It wasn't until my father died that it occurred to me I should perhaps stay here."

The pain was back in Alexandros's chest. "Do you need to stay, Hephaistion?" He put as much sincerity into the question as he could muster, given his apprehension. "It's an easy enough case to put to my father, that you stay to run the ranch." He started to add that it would kill him to do so, but bit his tongue.

His friend appeared genuinely torn. "I don't want to stay. I made a vow to stand beside you, and I don't break my vows. Plus, as much as I love Europos, I've seen too much of the world. I'd be bored to death here inside a year. But I worry. And I know my father would want me to stay."

"He'd also want you to be happy, not miserable."

Hephaistion didn't look convinced, but he whistled for Rhoias. "Let's go home."

Alexandros thought it was a long way from resolved, both Hephaistion's lingering anger as well as his uncertainty about what to do when the army left for Asia. But at least for now, they had a little peace.

*(Why this was cut: although I like this short scene, and it covers a lot of emotional ground, it's another "at the graveside," albeit in a different head. Yet it feels like a doublet. It also brings up an issue that can't be resolved in this first novel duo. So it was better to cut it and not leave loose ends.)*