

Hephaistion's age-mates spoke of desire like a fever, or bemoaned the bee-sting darts of Eros's arrows. But longing wasn't a bee sting for Hephaistion. It was Kharybdis, a vortex with teeth, eating him alive. Or it roared at him like the lions he'd heard the Persian kings fought, insistent and reverberating. It called him to follow down subterranean passageways, craving actions not approved of for well-bred boys. He wanted things he shouldn't want.

Like being fucked.

He'd told Alexandros why. It was a peculiar, inverted power: to contain, to hold, to embrace. It had woken something in him he could barely articulate. Yet that wasn't the way he was supposed to see it. He still wrestled with the variance. He wanted to believe it resolved in his own mind, but it hadn't been.

To add insult to injury, he fantasized about other activities he shouldn't crave and didn't dare confess to Alexandros, whose notion of love was all light and affection. Hephaistion basked in that. The way his friend would smile at him—just him—fired his soul, and when Alexandros threw a casual arm around his waist, as if it was the most natural thing in the world, his blood sang. When Alexandros kissed the nape of his neck, it resonated down his spine like a small hammer to a bronze cauldron. Bing, bing, bing. Pure. Pristine.

Yet what it stirred in Hephaistion wasn't pristine, even while it was soul-deep and talonsunk and heavy in his groin. All his daydreams involved Alexandros. His heart was constant, and Alexandros owned it. Yet his emotions were primal, not polite and genteel.

Ever since their conversation of two nights before, following his competition in the Hetairadeia, he'd been mulling over sex and love and the things he shouldn't need, but did. Yet it wasn't purely philosophical. Pragmatic concerns worried him too: the details they hadn't known in Agriana, and hadn't known they hadn't known until it had come down to it. Pictures on pottery weren't sufficient pedagogy. Unfortunately, Hephaistion had aged out of the cohort he could ask such things of without shame, as it would be obvious why he was asking. If not for himself, then for Alexandros. At twenty-two and almost twenty, they both were too old to be playing such a role, as least by common wisdom.

The afternoon following the strike force's dawn parade at Dion, Hephaistion blundered into somebody who might be able to help him.

Thettalos of Athenai.

He was astonished to see the actor in Makedonia after the shame Philippos had inflicted on him earlier that spring. Spotting him at a stall in the *agorá*, haggling with a merchant over a hat, Hephaistion called out, “Thettalos!” as much in surprise as to get his attention.

Turning, the actor raised both hands in theatric astonishment and said something to the merchant before crossing to greet Hephaistion. “*Khairē*, young Amyntoros! Congratulations on your finish in Single Combat.”

“I didn’t win.”

“You showed yourself quite well, nonetheless.” If not as tall as Hephaistion, Thettalos was still above average, but with a reedy body and a head that somehow seemed too large for him. That slight build worked well under the bulky robes and padding needed for tragedy. Just now, his full mouth was pulled into a grin. “I assume our handsome prince showered you with lauds and...other prizes?”

“You’re shameless.”

Thettalos fluttered fingers. “Of course I am. Everybody loves me for it.”

The assertion made Hephaistion laugh, because it was true. Thettalos got away with saying all manner of outrageous things simply because he was Thettalos, and people expected it. Yet his outrageousness was rarely cruel, and Hephaistion appreciated his honesty. “I have to say, I’m surprised to see you here at all, considering.” Hephaistion raised an eyebrow.

Thettalos shot him a side glance and indicated that they should walk. “You’re a horseman, young Amyntoros. What is the saying? When you fall off a horse...”

“...get back on it. Yes.”

“In truth, the king invited me.”

That stopped Hephaistion in his tracks. “He did?”

Pausing a few steps past him, Thettalos glanced back, grinning. “He knows he reached too far, yet his message was for his son, not me. He asked me to this *Hetairideia*, to perform at his supper party tonight.” The royal *symposion* to honor the officers leading the strike force. It was a singular honor for the acting troupe.

“What are you performing?”

“The *Bakkhai*.”

Hephaistion snorted. “Did you choose that, or did the king?”

“I chose it.”

“And I assume you’ll take the god’s mask, not Pentheus’s?”

“Naturally.” Thettalos’s grin reminded Hephaistion a little of the leering expression most often carved on Dionysos’s visage for that play.

“You’d better hope Philippos has a good sense of humor.”

“Oh, he does, young Amyntoros. He most certainly does.”

“My name is Hephaistion, you know.”

“I’m well aware.” He started walking again. “Yet if I call you by name, I might be tempted to poach on royal property.”

Not sure how to take that, and nervous, Hephaistion laughed.

“You really are most exquisite,” Thettalos continued, “but not my boy to claim.” Boy. *Eromenos*. Beloved.

The penetrated one.

Halting, Hephaistion jerked his head about to stare at Thettalos. Could he somehow *tell*? Or had he just assumed that Alexandros’s royal status would trump Hephaistion’s greater age? And how did Hephaistion feel about that? If he’d talked himself around to personal acceptance, Thettalos’s supposition still made him flinch.

They walked in silence for several paces. Despite being so late in the day, merchants remained at their stands as the *agorá* burred with festival tourists out hunting for trinkets or remembrances before departing the city on the morrow. Thettalos didn’t prompt Hephaistion, merely waited like a consummate hunter. As much as he talked, silence didn’t seem to trouble him. Finally, Hephaistion asked, “Why do you assume I’m his boy?”

“Aren’t you? He’s prince.”

And how did Hephaistion answer? It was the sort of query that damned a man if he agreed, and damned him if he didn’t.

Thettalos let him sweat over it for another twenty paces before saying, “You do realize I’d hardly look down on you for it. Alexandros pursues, always has, from the time he could toddle. It doesn’t matter if you’re older; he’s the scion of a king. And what are we, you and I, beside that sort of radiance?”

If poetic, it was also true.

Thettalos wasn't finished. "The sun, however, needs the blue bowl of heaven to set it off. You are the bowl. Bowls are important or supper spills."

Hephaistion grinned. "Now you're flattering me. And mixing your metaphors."

"Metaphors...pff. I'm telling you an important truth. 'Boy' is not such a good term for the likes of us, eh, Hephaistion?"

Hephaistion glanced over at the straightforward use of his name. "Neither is *kinaidos*." He sneered at the ugly term. Dancing boy. Effete. One who couldn't control himself sexually. The one who got fucked.

"Does that term alarm you? It doesn't alarm me. I refuse to let it. Men call me what they will, but none can match me onstage. I am the best. They all acclaim me after a performance, so what do I care of their opinions otherwise?"

His arrogance was as perfect as Alexandros's, and as honest.

"Find what you excel at," he went on. "Take pride in it, and don't let anyone spit on you if you don't fit neatly into their small-minded ideas of who or what a man should be." He paused in word and stride, looking off towards the upper town. "I wish someone had told me that twenty years ago."

"Thank you," Hephaistion replied.

Thettalos looked back at him, grinning. "But of course."

And that easily, Hephaistion relaxed, feeling accepted for the first time. Even Alexandros didn't truly understand, not at a deep level. Hephaistion still needed to *explain* to him. Justify. He didn't need to explain anything to Thettalos.

"Can I ask you some questions?" He blurted it out before he lost his nerve.

One of Thettalos's fine brows lifted, then was joined by the other. "Let me guess: these might be...uncomfortable questions?"

Hephaistion could feel the blood suffuse his cheeks.

In answer, Thettalos's grin bloomed. "I *love* naughty questions, young man. Ask away."

"They're not naughty. Just...practical."

Thettalos only chuckled. "You are too sweet, and too naïve. I'm teasing. Come." Hand on

Hephaistion's upper arm, he steered him over to an unoccupied wooden bench wedged between two open-air stalls. The roar of the crowd would cover anything they said.

Now that it had come to it, Hephaistion wasn't sure how to begin. Perhaps guessing as much Thettalos nudged his foot. "Blunt is best, you know. I swear by Zeus's cock, I won't so much as whisper a word about this."

Zeus's cock. Thettalos would make such a vow. Hephaistion snorted. "We tried him going inside me, but it didn't work very well. I don't think we knew what we were doing."

Thettalos didn't answer for a long moment and Hephaistion suspected that he'd surprised the actor. Yet hadn't Thettalos guessed him to be the receptive one?

Apparently, that wasn't the surprise. "But didn't you fuck him when you were younger?"

The frankness stiffened Hephaistion's spine. "He's *prince*. As you pointed out earlier."

Thettalos fluttered fingers. "You're telling me you've *never* gone at it in the arse, you or him, until recently? Truly never?"

Thettalos seemed to be struggling to hide his astonishment, and Hephaistion was sure his own face was scarlet, given how he was sweating. Why did Thettalos find it so odd? And how did he reply? "There were other things to do. That was enough."

"Purists, the both of you! As bad as Platon. But I'm glad you've outgrown it. So, in order to help, I need to know what went wrong, and not because I'm a noisy nit—although I am." He grinned. "But I really can't help you without some specifics."

So, after a pause and some throat clearing, Hephaistion related in general terms the problems in Agriana. Thettalos listened with surprising patience and offered not a single jest, although he easily could have. His quiet attention and a few judicious inquiries made it easier for Hephaistion to be honest.

When he was done, Thettalos straightened and held up fingers, counting off. "I have three important pieces of advice, young Amyntoros. First, there is no such thing as too much oil. Second, slow. Slower than what you think is slow, at least in the beginning. Last, for this, spontaneity isn't good, even if spontaneity is how the first time usually happens." He lowered his hand. "This sort of sex requires preparation for it to be sublime. And it can be sublime. You'll see. Follow me." He stood and headed off, Hephaistion scrambling after and wondering where they were going.

They wound up at a stall selling wineskins, which baffled Hephaistion. Thettalos purchased a small one, which he handed over as they walked away. “What does wine have to do with it?” Hephaistion asked.

“Wine? *Oa!* Please don’t put wine in your arse, young man. I doubt you’d like it much.”

“In my—”

“You fill that with *water* and some perfumed oil. That’s why the spigot and the fact you can squeeze it. No more than an hour or so before you plan to engage, you squirt the water in your rectum and clean yourself out. Not poetic, no, not something bards sing of, but perfectly practical, which is what you said you wanted to know. Otherwise things after can be...stinky when you’re shoving bolts. Even if you shat recently.” His eyebrows went up, as if asking a question.

Hephaistion could feel his face aflame. “It was, a bit.” At the time, they’d both been overwhelmed with other emotions, but odor was hard to ignore.

“Cleanliness is divine, the Pythagoreans taught. Use the waterskin. Now, a few other things you might need, but which won’t be in the *agorá*. Are you up to a bit of slumming, my aristocratic fellow?”

“I suppose?”

“Come along then.” And Thettalos led Hephaistion out into the alleys around the market where perfume shops, barbers, tabernas, and the occasional brothel could be found, a few with what amounted to specialty stores. As boys, the Pages had joked about going into them, daring each other. But when they had, they weren’t experienced enough to know what they sought.

Thettalos was no ignorant youth. He swept into one that reeked of acrid-sweet incense, demanding to look at their dildoes for men. Hephaistion was mortified, but also insanely curious. While they waited, he ran his gaze over the various goods for sale, all apparently intended for sex. Aside from dildoes, there were linen ties, duck-feather teasers, what looked like a leather riding crop, and little brass rings in various sizes but all too small to be bracelets. Of the latter, one was even decorated by a pair of griffin heads with glass eyes. He almost asked Thettalos what on earth it was used for, but the shop owner was back with a tray of items. “All imported from Miletos!” He set the tray on a table and cast a sidewise glance towards Hephaistion.

“Would you both like a room to try out your purchase?”

“Oh, he’s not mine,” Thettalos said with a flick of the hand but not looking up from the collection. “He’s quite spoken for. And please tell me these haven’t been *tried out* previously?”

“Of course not!” The owner affected horror.

“Wash it with vinegar in any case.” Thettalos spoke over his shoulder. The shop owner struggled to appear unoffended as Thettalos studied the leather phalloi on the little table. They ranged in size and color, but didn’t look like the dildoes elsewhere in the shop. These were shorter, curved, with a waist at the bottom above a bronze disk with a leather tie. The actor selected two—one a shocking bright red—and looked up. “How much?”

“I can pay,” Hephaistion said, but Thettalos waved him silent and haggled over the price.

“We’ll need a bag of some sort,” he told the owner, who supplied one made from cheap sackcloth for an extra three obols. This relieved Hephaistion enormously; he could have explained away the wineskin but not *dildoes*.

Outside, Thettalos handed over the bag.

“I’m not some widow. I don’t need a leathery slider,” he protested.

Thettalos smiled with none of his usual impudence. “Those are not meant for a woman. They’ll find that little spot inside your arse.”

“Isn’t that what he’s supposed to do? And I hardly need two!”

Thettalos laughed. “Yes, you do. They’re not the same size. Men, no less than women, have to grow used to it. Sex is hardly pleasant at first for a young girl.”

“It isn’t? I thought women liked it.”

Thettalos pressed the back of one hand to his forehead. “*Oimoi!*” Then he dropped the hand. “The body, whether a woman’s or a man’s, has to adjust. That takes practice.” He pointed to the bag in Hephaistion’s hands. “Before the two of you try again together, teach your body at your own pace. Nobody to watch; nobody to please. Smaller, then larger. That’s why two. Lots of oil. *Lots* of oil. The curve should face your belly to hit that special spot. It’ll take a bit for you to learn what your body likes, but once you’ve spilt that way, you’ll never go back.” He winked, then sobered.

“Being fucked shouldn’t hurt, Hephaistion. If it hurts, something’s wrong. Once you’re ready to try again, *talk* to him. Tell him when to go slow, or to stop altogether. Talking can be difficult when you’re young and insecure, but it’s essential.”

Given the fire in his neck and ears, Hephaistion knew he was blushing hard again, but appreciated Thettalos's frankness. Oddly, it felt less abrasive than if he'd been oblique. "Thank you. I wasn't aware of any of these things."

"Of course you weren't, because—*oa!*—young girls are taught more of what to expect on their wedding night than boys who take a lover, because they're not supposed to allow such things even while everybody does." He eyed Hephaistion sideways. "Well, everybody but young idealistic fools who've had their heads stuffed full of Platon. So, boys suffer in silence until they suss out the details on their own, if they do."

"Did you?"

"Yes. And I'm glad to share what I learned the hard way—the very hard and thick way—so you don't have to."

Predictably, Hephaistion blushed again, but suspected Thettalos said such things to make him feel less foolish. "I don't think it's quite as bad in Makedonia," he said. "I'm just old for it."

"And that's another problem. You're not 'old' for it. You are who you are, as is Alexandros. Convention isn't reality, you know."

"Thank you," Hephaistion said again.

"My pleasure, young Amyntoros." Thettalos sketched a perfect, Asian bow. "And if you need further practical assistance, you know whom to ask."

"I'll remember that."

*(Why this was cut: Despite some serious moments, this scene's overall tone is humorous, showing the normally self-possessed Hephaistion to be naïve regarding some matters. Yet at this point in the novel, as we barrel towards Philippos's death, that felt out-of-tune. Yet it's a vital conversation for Hephaistion's later development in the series, and Thettalos will become a recurring character. "Gnosis" means knowledge, sometimes of an esoteric or mystic nature.)*