

Afternoon exercise and drill at Mieza's little school *gymnasion* had a pattern: the youngest arrived first, the middle tier shortly after, and only later did the eldest arrive, establishing dominance by the implied detachment inherent in tardiness.

As Hephaistion, Erigyios, Harpalos, and Nikanor approached the area just south of the *nymphaion*, trailed by their dogs, they could make out wild shrieks and laughter, interspersed with the occasional, "Leonnatos, where is it?" and "*Run!*"

"By the Twins, what are they doing?" Erigyios muttered.

"I think we should hurry," Hephaistion said, giving Harpalos an apologetic glance, but Harpalos just waved them on.

"I'll catch up."

Jogging the rest of the way, the three emerged onto something out of a comedy for the stage. The youngest boys stood in the central grassy area near the fountain house, a single bow between them, eager hounds bouncing around. At the moment, Alexandros held the bow. Broken arm healed, he could draw once again. Pulling hard, he aimed straight up into a cloudless sky.

Before Hephaistion could shout, Alexandros loosed the shot. Everybody's chin jerked up as they followed the arrow's trajectory. "By the Furies' tits," Nikanor muttered, even as Leonnatos called, "Clear!" pointing up, then down, as the arrow plummeted back to earth between the huddle of boys and the newcomers. It hit a wooden path edger, making a solid thump. That could've been somebody's skull.

Infuriated, Hephaistion stalked over to grab the bow out of Alexandros's grip. "In the name of every god, what are you *doing*?"

"Chicken," the prince replied, grabbing for the bow. Hephaistion just raised it higher; one advantage of being tallest.

"Whose stupid idea was this?" Erigyios demanded.

All the boys glanced towards Leonnatos. *Of course it was Leonnatos.*

"It's just a bit of fun," Alexandros defended. "To see whose balls are bronze."

"Or whose head is soft," Hephaistion snapped back.

Alexandros glared. "Give me the bow."

"No."

"*Give* me the bow."

"*No.*"

The rest observed their confrontation with delicious attention. If everybody knew Hephaistion would challenge Alexandros, he usually did so in private. A public clash placed the prince's status in jeopardy. Just now, however, so was his safety. Hephaistion had given in to him over the sled, to disastrous results. He feared repeating that mistake.

Attention on Alexandros, he was unprepared to have Nikanor—the only one able to reach the tip that had dipped behind Hephaistion's back—snatch away the bow.

“*Oimoi!*” he shouted, spinning.

Nikanor just grinned, tossing the weapon to Alexandros, who caught it neatly. Hephaistion had more dignity than to engage in a tug-of-war over it.

“Obey the king-to-be, Amyntoros,” Nikanor told him, but without heat. “A game of chicken sounds like fun.”

“Do you want to see the prince skewered?” Hephaistion's voice probably gave away his fear because Alexandros gripped his wrist; he glanced around. Far from appearing annoyed, however, Alexandros just winked at him.

“Leonnatos has good eyes.” Perdikkas spoke for the first time. “He can follow it. When he can't, he calls foul and we run under the *stoa*.” Perdikkas pointed to a nearby covered portico.

“It's hardly ‘chicken’ then, but it is still idiotic.” Yet Hephaistion appeared to be alone in his opinion; even Erigyios was wavering in the face of the challenge.

Alexandros tossed the bow back to Nikanor. “Your turn.”

Still angry, Hephaistion glanced up the path, hoping the eldest students would arrive in time to knock sense into the heads of the rest. Surely Ptolemaios or Philotas wouldn't let such rubbish go forward. But nobody new appeared, even Harpalos.

Nikanor had knocked an arrow. “Shoot it straight up,” Leonnatos was telling him.

“It's all about who has the guts to stay put while the arrow comes down,” Perdikkas told Hephaistion.

“It's all about the lot of your being boneheaded idiots,” Hephaistion replied. “And it's not chicken if you're depending on Leonnatos to tell you when to run. But don't—” he waved hands “—take that as a challenge not to listen to him.” Because Alexandros very well might.

“Well, go and sit under the *stoa* then!” Leonnatos said. “Be a coward.”

“I'm not a coward.”

“Then stay out here with the rest of us.”

“Fuck you, *peoskephalos*. If you think me a coward, you can meet me in single combat with spear and sword. Right now? I am going under the *stoa* like a sane person while the rest of you madmen shoot arrows into the sky and risk getting hit.”

He stalked off, standing under cover and folding arms over his chest. A westering sun filled the bowl of the little grass-covered park, glancing off marble buildings and red-tile roofs, firing white columns under carved architraves with their vibrant paint.

A few boys looked his way, including Alexandros, but all had their honor committed now, even Erigyios and Nikanor. Hephaistion spotted Harpalos finally making his shuffling way into the park. He crossed to join Hephaistion under the *stoa*, not the boys on the lawn. “I take it they’re doing something risky and rash?”

“Exactly.” Hephaistion just gestured to where Nikanor had raised the bow heavenward again. “They shoot it up and wait for it to come down to see who’s bravest. Or stupidest.”

Harpalos laughed. “I’d be out there with them, if I could run.”

Hephaistion just stared at him, until he heard the *Whoop!* that indicated Nikanor had loosed. His head jerked around, but Leonnatos—chin craned back—had a hand up, finger pointing. “It’s clear!”

And indeed, it was. The arrow came down several feet away. The bow was passed to Erigyios.

“Do you hate it?” Hephaistion asked. “Not being able to run?”

“I can run. I just look as graceless as a satyr doing so, and I’m far from fast.” A short span followed, then he admitted. “Yes. I hate it.”

Hephaistion studied Harpalos as Erigyios took the center spot. “I’m sorry Tychē cheated you.”

Harpalos nodded once without looking over. They both watched Erigyios draw and loose. Leonnatos followed it up, hand shading his eyes, and Hephaistion could tell the moment he lost track of it. “Run!” he bellowed, and everybody raced for the *stoa*.

Then one raced out again, albeit on four legs

Hounds were ubiquitous. They accompanied the boys to the *nymphaion*, napping in the shade whilst Aristoteles lectured or took questions. At the day-meal, they stole cheese or begged for scraps. They slept at the foot of couches or by a door during midday rest. And they followed their masters to the *gymnasion* for exercise and drill; Hephaistion’s favorite, Anthē, Blossom, sat

by his ankle now, a subdued, well-behaved shadow. Yet in all the excitement, Perdikkas's young Oulos, Wooly, had dashed back out from under the *stoa*.

"No!" Perdikkas yelled.

The plummeting arrow pierced Oulos's side like a needle slipped through cloth to hold it, point downwards, feathers up.

Startled, the dog belled and tore about even more frantically as the boys exploded *en masse* to catch him, other dogs racing out too, barking wildly as if it were a game. It was just what Hephaistion had feared, albeit to a dog, and he rushed out to help. Terrified, Oulos wove and darted, evading capture. The arrow in his side bobbed as he ran. Alexandros directed everybody into a human net to snare him, rather than chasing him and exacerbating the injury. At point, Perdikkas talked Oulos calm, getting close enough to grab his collar.

Miraculously, the arrow had bifurcated precisely between Oulos's curly coat and the mass of muscle beneath. He was frightened, but barely bleeding and not seriously hurt. After dislodging the arrow, Alexandros bound up the wound.

The oldest boys had arrived by that point, observing the canine surgery and inquiring as to what had occasioned it. Hephaistion was mildly annoyed that nobody, even Ptolemaios, seemed terribly put out. "Won't anyone admit this was a foolish idea?" he asked.

"It's like war," Ptolemaios replied. "We take our chances."

"There are smart versus stupid chances, you know."

Ptolemaios took his elbow to pull Hephaistion back under the *stoa*, away from the clump of people around Perdikkas's dog. "You're upset because Alexandros put himself in danger."

"Of course I am."

Ptolemaios studied him without speaking. Finally, he said, "Zeus willing, he'll be king one day and lead battles. You can't protect him from that."

So stated, Hephaistion stared hard at the ground and scrubbed his face. "I know. But that's battle. This was a reckless game of chicken."

"And nobody got hurt but the dog, and the dog'll be well."

"How can you be so flippant? He's your brother."

Hephaistion's blunt affirmation startled them both; some things were better understood than verbalized, but Hephaistion didn't apologize for doing so. Ptolemaios shrugged with one shoulder. "Because he is my brother, I can't be seen to challenge his choices, or I'd be perceived

as a rival.”

“Not by him.”

“Maybe not at first, but whispering in a royal’s ear is a traditional court pastime. I’d rather provide no fodder. In any case, it doesn’t change the main point. You have to accustom yourself to the fact he could die in battle, Phaistas.”

“I told you, that’s battle. This was different. The sled fiasco earlier, now this!”

Ptolemaios studied him. “You still feel responsible that he got hurt with the sled.”

“I should have stopped the bet.”

“It wouldn’t have stopped *him*. And chicken is far from the dumbest thing he’s ever done. Pick your battles. He does listen to you sometimes.” It was the same thing Harpalos had said after the sled crash. “Save your influence for when it really matters, then stand your ground like his life depends on it.”

*(Why I deleted it: if an amusing tale of teen boys Doing a Dumb, in many ways, this duplicates the earlier sled scene. A few more tit-bits of information are revealed about Harpalos and Ptolemaios, but most readers could guess these; it doesn’t significantly advance the plot or show anything not already revealed. Still, it is fun, so I offer it up. And it did really happen, as told to me by an old friend, about himself and his brothers. Their dog was fine, but such a shot couldn’t have been made if someone had tried. Pure chance.)*