

Hephaistion waited in line with men he didn't know well, archaic Illyrian helm tucked in his left arm, shield braced against his left knee. Today, he wasn't riding. Philippos had recently promoted him to the Pezhetairoi, the crack infantry considered the king's personal guard in combat. Rather than be composed of regional units, Philippos chose men based on two things: size, and skill with a sword. Hephaistion possessed both, so perhaps he should've seen the appointment coming, but being removed from the prince's cavalry *agema* had surprised him. He was fairly sure nothing personal hid behind the change—after all, he'd placed seventh in personal combat at the last Hetairedeia—but couldn't suppress a niggling doubt.

Alexandros was somewhere behind with his uncle and father. Hephaistion had seen them all walk by with torch bearers earlier, but had made no attempt to catch the prince's attention. Somewhere ahead, sheep and oxen bleated or lowed. The priests would lead them at the head of the parade.

Despite the early hour, sun unrisen yet, muggy air turned his muscle cuirass stifling. He missed the lighter linethorax for cavalry, but Pezhetairoi were typically heavily armored. He had a full-sized hoplite shield too. Around him, men joked with each other. His natural reticence combined with his status as the prince's lover led to a certain exclusion, but it had been the same in the Pages so he was accustomed to it.

Strutting like a cockerel, Pausanias, now a Pezhetairos sub-officer, came by, calling the men to suit up for inspection. He moved up and down the lines, checking fastenings, the burnish of bronze, the precise tilt of a man's chin. He paused longer than usual in front of Hephaistion as if looking extra hard for a flaw, but all he could say was, "That's a ridiculous old helm. You pull it out of the family tomb? Get a new one."

"I'm not sure that would be a good idea," Hephaistion replied.

Pausanias got right in his face. “Why not?”

“The prince gave it to me.”

Behind him, he heard somebody snort, probably enjoying Hephaistion’s tweaking of Pausanias. Hephaistion wasn’t entirely sure why Pausanias nursed a special loathing for him, but suspected it owed to the fact he coveted Hephaistion’s place in the prince’s shadow, and bed. If he generally avoided rubbing other’s noses in his unique status, in part because he preferred to earn his place, with Pausanias, he took pleasure in such reminders.

Now, Pausanias simply pursed his lips and moved on with his inspection before returning to the *dekas* of Pezhetairoi who’d bring up the rear of the parade behind the king.

“He’s looking a bit...unsettled this morning,” the man beside Hephaistion said. Ariston of Lynkestis. Unlike Hephaistion, he was a commoner, but in this unit, that didn’t matter. He still had seniority.

“I thought ‘unsettled’ was his normal expression,” Hephaistion replied, setting down his shield again. The blasted thing was heavy, even made of ash. His had a bronze rim, the central area painted with a stallion’s head, gold on black.

“The son of a billy-goat has no fucking right to command me,” said a man behind. Meleagros. “I’ve been in this unit five fucking years. He’s been in it five months.”

“King’s keeping him quiet, after what Attalos did to him,” Ariston replied.

“He deserved worse, the cocksucker.”

Hephaistion twisted his neck to eye Meleagros, who seemed to have remembered who stood in front of him. But that only caused him to double-down.

“No self-respecting man should want to keep playing the boy after his beard comes in.” Was that a bit too deliberate in Hephaistion’s hearing? “The king was right to put him aside and

punish the little shit after what he did to Hippostratos.”

“But it’s all right that Attalos had him gang-raped?” Hephaistion asked.

“He got that boy killed!”

Hephaistion sighed; Meleagros was correct.

“He’s not exactly your friend,” Ariston added. “Why’re you defending him?”

“I’m not. He’s a bastard. But Attalos is no better; he’s a climber. Parmenion had better watch his back in Asia.”

“Parmenion? Attalos’d be out of his mind to go after Parmenion!”

“And he wasn’t, for implying the prince isn’t Philippos’s son?”

“The queen does have a bad reputation.”

“Not for affairs outside the marriage bed.” Why, Hephaistion thought, did he have to defend, back-to-back, two people he detested? “Have you taken a good look at the prince’s *nose*? Or his build? Ignore his coloring, ignore the eyes. He’s Philippos’s son or I’m a centaur.”

“Kid has a point,” said Meleagros. “Attalos is a scheming son of a snake. He’ll say anything to get ahead.”

“And you’ll say anything against him ‘cause he got the command you expected to get.” Ariston glanced back. “You’re a hot-head, Meleagros. That’s why the king didn’t promote you, not to the strike force, and not even to a sub-command of your own regiment.”

“You lying weasel—”

“My point is made.”

“Settle down up there!” came from the rear. Their unit’s real commander, Alketas.

“Piss ass,” Meleagros muttered.

Nobody replied. Ahead, Hephaistion could hear the rumble of carts and clatter of feet as

the parade finally began to move forward. He lifted his shield, sliding his arm through the central bronze hoop up to his elbow and gripping the handle at the edge.

The parade moved from Aigai's gate up towards the theatre on the hill slope below the palace. The sky had finally lightened enough for Hephaistion to see those lining the road, jostling for a view and chanting Philippos's name. Occasionally Alexandros's name, or that of one of the soldiers passing was shouted instead. For the latter, probably family members. Being positioned near the middle of the column, he was caught on all sides, unable to see much, and would be thrilled when this was over so he could get some free air. Something had caused the line to pause and men behind jostled against his back before halting. "What now?" somebody muttered.

"One of the oxen tried to run away, or so they're saying."

That woke mutters; a balking sacrifice was a bad omen. Yet the priests must have decided to ignore it, as the line soon moved forward again. Philippos was unlikely to be pleased if they called for a re-start, or, worse, a postponement because some ox got spooked by all the noise.

No more pauses beset the column as it wended up the road to the theatre. The roar of the crowd grew as they approached, and the sun, lingering yet below the horizon, gave enough light to see easily. As soldiers reached the theatre back, instead of passing through the *parados*, the tunnel into the main orchestra circle, they peeled off to find places on the hillside. It still caused a logjam as men jostled about. Hephaistion stepped away under a pine to pull off his helm and wipe his face. He was joined shortly by Leonnatos, also now in the Pezhetairoi if a different unit, and Perdikkas who sub-commanded the Orestian foot. They waited until joined by both Marsyas and Attalos Andromenou, who'd been at Mieza with them. Marsyas handed out cloth streamers in bright colors: yellow, blue, green, red, orange. Hephaistion took a green one; it was his favorite color.

The five watched the rolling statues rumble past, disappearing one at a time into the tunnel, Zeus leading and Philippos bringing up the rear. In the orchestra, they'd make a semicircle behind the altar. Hephaistion wondered where the king's statue would end up. Would he have the audacity to take center place?

Kings and prince were approaching finally, bring up the end of the parade, a pair of blond heads before black. Or really, grizzled these days; Philippos had grayed significantly since his thigh wound in Thrakē, and he still limped. But today, he looked in good health and spirits both, waving to the crowd, square face lit from joy. Alexandros of Makedon smiled as well, although the Epirote king appeared muted. Hephaistion hoped that didn't bode ill for Kleopatra. Once she'd become formally engaged, he'd seen little of her. He hoped they had a bit of time for geometry before she departed for Epiros. The thought of her immanent exodus saddened him in a way he'd not expected, but he'd come to consider her a friend.

The two Alexandroses had drawn even with Hephaistion, who met the prince's gaze briefly, then Attalos passed him a yellow streamer and he moved on. The king entered the tunnel just behind as the *dekas* of Pezhetairoi—Pausanias's own unit—formed a barrier of shields to close the entry and keep off crowds.

On the eastern horizon, the sun perched, rays blinding. "Come on, we should go and find seats," Leonnatos was saying. The crowd inside had fallen unusually quiet, perhaps in respect for the king—or shock at the thirteenth statue. In any case, it allowed Hephaistion to hear from within the tunnel: "Alex . . . andros."

He peered past the line of Pezhetairoi in time to watch the king collapse in Alexandros's arms, apparently pushed there by Pausanias...who was running away?

Slamming his helmet back on his head and grabbing his shield, Hephaistion pushed

through the line of soldiers, who didn't stop him. He arrived at the prince's side even as Alexandros pointed after Pausanias, bellowing, "*Get him!*"

Two of the Bodyguard leapt after, as did Leonnatos, Perdikkas, and Attalos.

Hephaistion wouldn't budge from Alexandros's back. If unsure what was happening, he knew it wasn't good and tried to look in every direction at once. Alexandros of Epiros asked, "What happened?" but Alexandros of Makedon didn't reply. Hephaistion glanced down finally. The prince was bent over the king, whose face Hephaistion could see past his shoulder.

There was no life in that face.

Alexandros seemed to realize it at the same moment as he literally dropped the body and stared at the blood on his arms and hands. "The king is dead," he said, the last word lifting slightly as if a question, not a statement. He looked up at the rest of them. Then he stood as Antipatros pushed through to kneel by the body.

Hephaistion stared at Alexandros's profile; his friend's expression was blank as his eyes flicked over the stadium full of people shouting around them. Hephaistion tried to remember what it felt like, in those first moments after, to lose a father. Yet he'd known it coming, dreading that transition for months, the shift from son to paternal orphan, the pain seeping in by increments, expanding his heart until it grew sluggish and burdened.

Alexandros had been ambushed.

Hephaistion could see his mind working, the muscles of his face gradually tightening, lips thinning, eyes narrowing. The good pupil constricted inside bright blue even as the sun finally rose enough to blast light down into the theatre, picking him out and firing yellow curls under a thin gold crown of oak leaves.

Here stood the king of Makedon.

Hephaistion almost dropped to a knee. Instead, he lifted his shield and unsheathed his sword, stepping to Alexandros's side, watching everyone. Pausanias had killed Philippos, but did he have accomplices? Were they standing or kneeling around the man they'd helped to murder? Would one of them spring on Alexandros next?

Anybody who made even a suspicious move in Alexandros's direction would get Hephaistion's sword in his throat.

Alexandros knelt again as the remaining Somatophylakēs wrapped the king's body in his own cloak. He spoke to Antipatros. "You've been my father's regent for longer than I've been alive. Get up on that stage and say something. We've got to get these people out of here without starting a riot."

Nodding, Antipatros rose and ascended the platform, speaking loudly enough to be heard by all. The bowl of the theatre picked up his voice, amplifying it. "Please remain seated! The king has suffered an attack and festivities will have to be postponed. Soldiers will come around to escort you from the theatre."

Alexandros was already pointing at officers. "Antigonos, Polemokrates, Andromenos, Kleitos, Xenodokos: take your men and get these people out of here in an orderly fashion, but keep them inside city walls even if they're camped outside it. Krateros and Menes, use your men to close all gates into and out of Aigai, and police the perimeter. Arrest anybody who tries to escape. Kleandros, find my cousin and keep an eye on him, but be polite about it."

They snapped to follow orders, no back-talk.

Alexandros seemed finally to notice Hephaistion. "What are you doing?"

"Protecting you," Hephaistion replied. "Your father's dead; you're his heir."

For the first time, the straight face cracked; Alexandros's eyes grew wide and his lips

parted slightly, as if he'd only now put two and two together to find they made four.

Yet his attention was diverted by Perdikkas, Leonnatos, and Attalos, hauling Pausanias's body, run through with a spear.

"Confound it!" Alexandros exploded, cheeks flaring pink, and for a moment, Hephaistion feared he might strike Leonnatos in a rage. He refrained, instead glancing to the Somatophylakēs bearing away Philippos's body, muttering, "A failure of justice got you killed."

Hephaistion stared at Pausanias's corpse, wondering what Alexandros knew. Or was he simply inferring? Was this an assassination, or an honor killing?

A sudden sound of metal clashing on metal startled him and he jumped along with the prince. No, the *king*.

How long would it take to get used the change of noun?

Alexandros of Lynkestis, Leonnatos's royal cousin, had made his way to Alexandros's other side and now beat his spear on his shield. The sound echoed off the hillside. Within moments, others in the honor guard joined him, banging spears on their shields too, until the sound deafened. It confused some guests, but the Makedonians knew what it signified.

The king was dead, and they were acclaiming a new one.

Around the amphitheatre, men sprang to their feet, beating on whatever came to hand.

*"Alexandros! Alexandros! King of the Makedonēs!"*

Antipatros escorted Alexandros into the orchestra center. Sword still in hand, Hephaistion followed, and all around, people kept up their chant so that a great roar echoed off the hillside.

*"Alexandros! Alexandros! King of the Makedonēs!"*

Hephaistion wasn't watching the crowd anymore. He was watching Alexandros. Backlit by the sun, face transported, he glowed.